

Optimising Employee Performance during Working from Home. Lessons from Covid 19

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Received: 9 February 2026 | Accepted: 31 March 2026 | Published: 31 May 2026

Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to determine strategies for improving the performance of employees while working from home, learning from the experiences and challenges that employees had during the time of Covid 19. The study used a survey strategy to gather data from 49/50 respondents, sampled in Harare, Zimbabwe, using an online questionnaire. A combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques was used. The responses were chosen at random using the email addresses of Harare employees. The Self-Determination theory served as the study's compass and a review and analysis of theoretical and empirical research on working from home was also conducted. From the study, it was evident that "working from home" was a concept which needed more attention than previously acknowledged. Hence, this study proposed strategies for optimising homeworking in organisations, thus giving pointers to what needed to be done to implement "working from home" effectively. This study recommended strategies for optimising working from home, which included implementing timetables for crucial feedback and questions, training employees, creating opportunities for virtual social interaction with workmates, assisting employees to deal with computer glitches at home and many others.

Keywords: Working from home, Employee performance, Strategies, Optimising, Covid 19

Introduction

Working from home (WFH) is the global new norm induced by the Covid 19 pandemic. In Zimbabwe, the practice of working from home is new to most companies. Very few companies in Zimbabwe prepared for the COVID-19 endorsed work from home practice. The lockdown imposed for all non-essential companies resulted in organisations requesting their employees to be creative and continue working from home as much as possible. Working from home became the new norm. Working from home brought about advantages related to work-life balance, employee productivity and job satisfaction. Most jobs now required knowledge in computer-based applications. However, this new norm of working from home was spontaneous and it came as a surprise to most organisations and employees. This presented some challenges to organisations on how to carry on with their work to remain productive. The Zimbabwean Government announced, in March 2020, the nationwide "Lockdown" as a strategic response to managing the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, both managers and employees found themselves with very little choice but to work from home for most of the time. According to Felstead and Jewson (2000), there are many definitions of homeworking. This research broadly adopts the definition that working from home is a type of flexible working whereby the

employee does his or her office duties in the comfort of his or her home in return for payment. This implied that the study was focusing on formal employment.

The concept of working from home for many Zimbabwean companies was popularised during a lockdown because of measures taken by the government to manage the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Self-quarantine and lockdown resulted in many people being forced to work from home. The sudden switch to working from home, therefore, disrupted the status quo. Working from home became the “new norm” and yet both organisations and employees were not really prepared for its implementation. Working from home, had its own challenges that made implementation difficult. Organisations with a thriving mindset focused on creating new realities and recognised that disruption was continuous rather than episodic. (Deloitte, 2021). The challenges presented by Covid -19 required organisations to come up with coping strategies that helped them to thrive in such an environment, thereby propelling organisational success. It was against this background that the researcher carried out a study, examined the experience of homeworking, drawing on a study of employees working from home during the Covid 19 pandemic. The aim was to surface what needed to be done to implement the working-from-home concept more effectively.

Literature Review

Concept of working from home

The terms ‘remote work’ and ‘working from home’ and ‘flexible hours’ are often used interchangeably, but there are differences in meaning. ‘Remote work’ is a concept that requires employees to work from anywhere outside of the traditional office, while work from home means exactly working from home and not just anywhere. With ‘remote work’, the work could be done from home, or remotely (Michalak & Rysavy, 2022). So remote work is more of an umbrella term describing work done outside of the traditional office on the road, in a coffee shop or abroad. Therefore, remote work is an umbrella term describing work done outside the traditional office, which does not require one to commute to the office and this includes working from home. This study adopted the ‘working-from-home’ definition that emphasises strictly working from home.

Essentials of homeworking

The Acas research found out several essentials that should be available to make the best out of working from home. These essentials are outlined below and they should guide employers and employees on how to effectively execute the working from home norm, for maximum benefit to the organisations.

The home office should have an ergonomic chair that provides comfort to the worker. This helps in preventing havoc on the back, because of sitting long hours, which may kill productivity. There is also a need for a dedicated desk to increase productivity. Workers shouldn't resort to working from the dining room or kitchen table, but they should have a dedicated desk for work, as this psychologically helps them to commit to their work whenever they sit on that dedicated desk.

There is also a need for good lighting when working from home because it helps in reducing eye strain. This is supported by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, where he advocated for good working conditions such as lighting, space and aeration to maximise productivity. There

is also a need for a good charging place for a laptop. When one is working from home, another essential is an all-in-one printer that can scan, fax, copy and print. It is important to note that essentials like stationery should also be made available to workers to enable them to have adequate material at the convenience of their homes, thus maximising productivity.

Theory underpinning the study

This study primarily used the Self-Determination Theory to describe how to maximise worker performance when working from home.

Self- Determination Theory

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposes that human behaviour is motivated by three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need to have a sense of volition and control is referred to as autonomy. The need to feel capable and effective is referred to as competence. The need to feel linked and appreciated by others is referred to as relatedness. In the context of working from home, SDT suggests that employees are more likely to be motivated to work from home if their psychological needs are met. (Gagne & Deci, 2005). In this situation, companies must allow workers the freedom to decide how to complete tasks while working from home so that they feel motivated to perform better. On the aspect of competence, it is essential that home workers are provided with the necessary training, especially on technology, since they will be using it mostly while working from home. Finally, on the aspect of relatedness, it is crucial that homeworkers are given an opportunity to relate to their coworkers so that they feel connected and valued by others. This may be facilitated through creating virtual interaction platforms and assigning tasks that require teamwork to enhance social interaction among employees working from home.

Managing Home Workers

There are four key ingredients for managing productive homeworking, which include building trust between staff who work from home and their manager, agreeing on how work performance will be supervised and measured and effective communication and training. To build trust between staff and employees, organisations or management need to ensure that employees are aware of what is expected from them and how they are expected to work together.

Employees are expected to keep their managers up-to-date on how work is progressing and to offer help to others in building a team spirit to manage performance. Managers are also advised to evaluate staff working from home based on the quantity and quality of work output and agreed-upon objectives. Both staff and managers need to agree in advance on the appropriate appraisal process. Managers are also encouraged to monitor their subordinates to ensure that they are not overworking.

Communication is facilitated by ensuring that employers explain to their employees how ideas, information and feedback are shared. This can be done through video conferencing, email, telephone and other means. Appropriate methods should be chosen that are conducive to both the employer and employee. It can also be helpful for organisations and employees working from home to establish a system where they keep in touch with all staff who work from home. Regular face-to-face meetings encourage overcoming any feelings of isolation amongst the employees. To ensure that staff are aware of their day-to-day duties, the organisation is also

expected to establish a system that reminds employees to be aware of their day-to-day availability.

For home workers to understand what is expected of them, training and growth are essential components. Technology plays a pivotal role in ensuring that home working is a success. It is important that employees are given adequate support and training in the use of modern technologies so that they perform better.

However, it is crucial to remember that not every company or individual finds success with homeworking, therefore before a homeworking agreement is approved, all factors must be carefully considered. Any arrangement should be reviewed regularly by the employer to make sure it continues to meet both the business and the employee's personal needs. The most effective arrangements are meticulously planned, with management and employees who are all dedicated to making homeworking work, as well as clear policies and procedures to support them.

Advantages of working from home

Studies have shown that working from home has its own advantages as described below.

Staying long-term on one job.

Having a laptop means that you can work from home at any time suitable to you and this allows you to accommodate work demands. Remote jobs also mean that if you are considering maternity leave or your partner gets a job in a different city, you do not have to sacrifice the job you love for the person you love. That way you can stay long on the job.

Quality and not quantity of work

The foundation of remote work is the idea that you will complete your work without having to sit in a chair for 40 hours a week or from 8 to 5 pm, as is the case in a traditional workplace in Zimbabwe.

The result is that one focuses on quality and not on quantity and this is good for everyone, including the company.

You feel healthier

People who commute to offices are less likely to exercise and eat well. When they work from home, they can enjoy home-cooked meals and treat themselves to a stroll or a trip to the gym after spending the entire day at home.

Disadvantages of Working from Home

Working from home has its own disadvantages and these are discussed below.

Feeling isolated

People who are accustomed to working in a crowded workplace may feel lonely and depressed if they abruptly convert to working from home.

Responsibility for staying on track

Working from home means that you are your own supervisor. No one is checking to see how hard you are working. You are required to get your work done on time. Although this promotes taking responsibility for one's work, this could be challenging for people who lack motivation. You are only expected to do your assignment on time; no one checks to see how hard you are working.

Reduced Access to the Team

Compared to working in an office, where you could simply stroll across to the other person, working from home means that team members are not always easily accessible. It might mean delayed input and feedback from team members.

Need for more skills and resources

Working from home means that one loses the privilege of having access to skills and resources that the office offers for example IT skills and resources.

Research Methodology

The study's sample size was fifty employees. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), it was deemed adequate for a mixed-methods study since it included a representative sample of workers who had worked from home. A combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to select participants for this study. Purposive sampling was used to select employees in Harare because of its reputation as the capital city of Zimbabwe, with a larger proportion of employees who experienced working from home during Covid 19. (Patton, 2015). Employees that the researcher could contact via email, who had worked from home during COVID-19 and who the researcher believed would be reliable sources of information about the issue being studied were chosen via purposeful sampling. A structured questionnaire was sent to 50 individuals using email addresses to choose the real respondents at random; 49 of them replied, yielding a 98% response rate. The purpose of the questionnaire's structured questions was to gather data on the experiences of workers who were unexpectedly forced to work from home. A four-point Likert scale was used, whereby (SD) means Strongly Disagree, (D) means Disagree, (A) means Agree and SA means Strongly Agree. Data was analysed using Excel spreadsheets to obtain the descriptive statistics on the problem under investigation. The results were interpreted and discussed as shown below.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire focused on determining the challenges and opportunities of homeworking basing five fundamental dimensions of homeworking adopted from the literature review. These included employee self-discipline, work-life balance, personality, technical support and critical job requirements. The data was gathered, analysed and interpreted considering the questions

asked along those five key coping strategies of homeworking. The descriptive statistics were computed using Excel and the outcomes were described below.

Distribution of Responses on Self-discipline

Table 1: Self Discipline

<i>Self-discipline</i>	SD	D	A	SA
I find excuse to skip work when working from home	23(46.9)	12(24.5)	13(26.5)	1(2.9)
I work very well without direct supervision	4(8.2)	6(12.2)	16(32.7)	13 (46.9)
I have a designated call time	14(28.6)	17(34.7)	14(28.6)	4(8.1)
I am more productive when working solo	6(12.2)	9(18.4)	22(44.9)	12(24.5)
I have no challenges in meeting deadlines	5(10.2)	6(12.2)	15(30.6)	23(46.9)
I am motivated to work from home	4(8.2)	16(32.7)	21(42.9)	8(16.3)

When asked if they found a reason to miss work when working from home, nearly 47% strongly disagreed and 25% disagreed. This gave a combined majority of 71% of the respondents disagreeing with the statement. People did not find any excuse to skip work when working from home, implying that the employees valued their work even if they were working from home.

46.9 % of the respondents strongly agreed that they worked very well without direct supervision, while 32.7 % just agreed. The results also showed that a total of 20.4 % needed close supervision. The results indicated that employees were comfortable working without direct supervision. They were adequately aware of what was expected from them.

A total of 63.3 % of the respondents did not have a designated call time, while the remaining few had designated call times. This meant that employees did not have scheduled call times and they were not disciplined in that aspect. There was therefore a need to implement timetables for crucial feedback questions.

Employees worked more productively when they worked alone, as shown by the combined 44.9% agreeing with the statement, of which 24.5 % strongly concurred with the statement. This implied that they valued autonomy.

Almost 78% of the respondents had no challenges in meeting deadlines when they worked from home. The level of motivation was also high, as revealed by 59.3% of the respondents who at least agreed with the statement. This meant that employees appreciated and liked the new norm of home working. The findings above pointed to the conclusion that employees were disciplined when working from home and therefore needed to maintain that stance to ensure that the new norm of homeworking reaped positive results.

Distribution of Responses on Work-Life Balance

Table 2: Work-Life Balance

Work-Life Balance	SD	D	A	SA
I can perform household chores at break	13(26.5)	16(32.7)	13(26.5)	7(14.3)
I have worked from home Before	12(24.5)	8(16.3)	19(38.8)	10(20.4)
I can enlist help with chores from family members	8(16.3)	11(22.4)	19(38.8)	11(22.4)
I can manage multiple roles working from home	4(8.2)	9(18.4)	27(55.1)	9(18.4)
Children understand and leave me to do my work	3(6.1)	9(18.4)	23(46.9)	14(28.6)
It is easy to balance family and job demands	3(6.1)	12(24.5)	26(53.1)	8(16.3)
Can addresses my work life balance needs	3(6.1)	10(20.4)	30(61.2)	6(12.2)
Have something to fall back on when bored	3(6.1)	9(18.4)	21(42.9)	16(32.7)

While over 40.9% of respondents agreed that they may and do complete other domestic duties during breaks while engaging in work-related activities, the majority of respondents (59%) disagreed with this assertion. This implied that employees were unable to mix work issues with home chores; they were focused and valued their work. However, a significant number (40.9%) still left work to perform their household chores, pointing to the need for supervision and awareness on the importance of homeworking.

The majority, (38.8%), of the respondents, had worked from home before, of which of them, 20.4% strongly agreed with the assertion. It was not their first time and 60.9% indicated that they could easily enlist help from family members to do household chores if they were committed. More than half (55.1%) revealed that they could perform multiple roles of both work and household chores without any difficulty, but about 45% found it difficult and this was quite a significant number. Hence, the need to train employees on ways to improve work-life balance.

When working from home, most respondents indicated that their children were very cooperative as they would leave them to do their work without any disturbances. (46.9% agreed and 28.6% strongly agreed). While 53.1% of respondents did not consider juggling work and family obligations to be a serious problem, a noteworthy 47% of respondents did. Working from home allowed people to easily switch roles if they got bored.

In summary, the above results of work-life balance showed that the employees' work-life balance was not a hassle. Working from home did not prevent the execution of jobs; instead, it encouraged work-life balance and hence, this was a positive stride to organisations since the total effective implementation of the new norm could boost productivity through facilitating work-life balance.

Distribution of Responses on the Personality of the Respondents

The majority, (79.6%), agreed that working from home allowed them to work for long hours, which was sometimes difficult to do at the workplace. This was one of the advantages that came with working from home. There was, therefore, a need for management to encourage

employees to work long hours that came with homeworking to encourage employees to adopt it.

Sixty-seven (67%) agreed that they had the patience to wait for delays that might arise working from home, while 23% indicated that they did not have that patience. This meant that the system was well accepted and would not be difficult to implement because it was accepted by the employees. However, management still needed to address the issue of those without patience, as it affected job performance.

People had different views when asked about whether they felt lonely and socially isolated when working from home (55.1% - against: 44.9% - for the view). While fifty-five percent (55%) of the respondents indicated that they did not feel lonely and isolated working from home, forty-five (45%) did. People were used to interacting with workmates, hence the need to constantly provide affiliation opportunities to them to improve the effectiveness of this new norm. This implied that opportunities for virtual interaction with workmates should be created.

A good 28% of the respondents feared making mistakes when they worked from home. This pointed to the need for training to improve self-confidence that was required when people worked from home because they feared making mistakes. Sixty-one percent (61%) disagreed that it was difficult for them to manage disturbances that might arise with working from home. This pointed to the need for employees to practice self-discipline and to have a work schedule that should be adhered to. Eighty-three (83%) of the respondents indicated that they felt comfortable with virtual interaction, 50.1% agreed and 30.6% strongly agreed). Virtual interaction was also accepted in this organisation, indicating that employees enjoyed virtual interaction, which was a positive stride in ensuring the effectiveness of the new norm.

Critical Work Home Job Enablers	SD	D	A	SA
Have a quiet corner/room to work from at home	2(4.1)	10(20.4)	20(40.8)	17(34.7)
Family members understand that I work from home	1(2.0)	7(14.3)	24(49.0)	17(34.7)
Can delegate responsibilities of family chores to others	1(2.0)	10(20.4)	19(38.8)	19(38.8)
Have the requisite equipment at home	5(10.2)	6(12.2)	18(36.7)	20(40.8)
Access information	4(8.2)	5(10.2)	28(57.1)	12(24.5)
Access to tools	3(6.1)	8(4.2)	24(49.0)	14(28.6)
Have access to reliable internet connectivity at home	4(8.2)	8(4.2)	20(40.8)	17(34.7)
Have reliable computer to work from home	-	11(22.4)	19(38.8)	19(38.8)
Have reliable power supply at home	6(12.2)	16(32.7)	17(34.7)	10(20.4)
Nature of my job is suited to working remotely	7(14.3)	12(24.5)	24(49.0)	6(12.2)

73% of the respondents promptly responded to emails when working from home. Almost 63% had separate email addresses for personal and for work. This showed that they had good work ethics, which facilitated easy and effective execution of the new norm of working from home.

47 % found it difficult to stay away from social media distractions when at home. This implied that there were no controls for managing these distractions when employees were working from

home; it was recommended to design controls that minimised such distractions. This again called for training in self-discipline. 79.6 % prioritised work, whilst 20.4 % did not. This meant that most people's personalities were not cultured to work from home. Hence the need to train employees on this aspect.

Keeping a regular work schedule when working from home was problematic, with almost 53% of the respondents not keeping a regular work schedule, again pointing to the need for self-discipline. There was a need for timetables and other control strategies to ensure this worked well.

Distribution of Responses on Technical Support

Technical support	SD	D	A	SA
I can easily deal with technical glitches	6(12.2)	14(28.6)	17(34.7)	12(24.5)
I need support to deal with computer challenges	9(18.4)	12(24.5)	18(36.7)	10(20.4)
I have someone to assist if glitches occur	11(22.4)	10(20.4)	16(32.7)	12(24.5)

While Sixty (60%) of the respondents indicated that they could deal with technical glitches at home, the other 40% indicated otherwise and 56 % indicated that they still needed support in one way or another in handling computer challenges at home. 42% of the respondents did not have anyone at home to assist them with glitches when they occurred. This meant that businesses needed to have a way to help employees who worked from home with computer issues.

Distribution of Responses on Critical Working from Home Job Enablers

Only 24% indicated that they did not have a quiet corner/room to work from at home. The majority had it. The majority, (84%), agreed that their family members understood that they worked from home. Many of the respondents 76.4% delegated responsibilities of family chores to others. This implied that all the critical enablers for working from home were in place, enabling the implementation of the new system. Almost 78% indicated that they had the requisite equipment to work effectively from home, 75.5% had access to reliable internet connections and 78% had access to reliable computers; however, 44.9% did not have access to a reliable power supply. There was a greater need to provide adequate power supply, equipment, internet connections and reliable computers to make working from home a success. Almost half (49.0%) of the respondents indicated that their respective nature of work suited them to work remotely. This pointed to the need for management to consider the nature of jobs when requesting employees to work from home.

Distribution of Responses on Organisational Preparedness

Findings on the level of organisational preparedness for employees to work from home are presented and discussed below. Almost 51% of respondents indicated that their organisations were willing to pay for home improvements, compared to the other 49% whose companies would not be willing to pay for home improvements to facilitate working from home more

effectively. This presented a challenge to the effectiveness of the working-from-home norm. Organisations were prepared to foot that bill for the effectiveness of the new system.

A slight majority, (53.1%), were not in agreement on meeting part of the costs incurred by their workers when they worked from home, like electricity, lighting, Wi-Fi and telephone costs. This implied that quite some employees were not able to perform their duties due to cost challenges, hence the need for organisations to foot the costs arising from home working.

The majority, 69.3%, reported that their management could easily reach out to all staff if there were emergencies, whilst 30.7% of respondents indicated that their management did not easily reach out to staff during emergencies when they worked from home. Management was to find ways of being readily available for emergencies arising with staff working from home. Management needed to establish functional communication systems to make that system effective.

Almost 59.2% respondents indicated that their companies did not have virtual training programs for their employees who might need that intervention. This distracted from the effectiveness of the working from home norm, hence the need for proper virtual training to make homeworking effective.

Many of the respondents, 44.9%, disagreed with the statement that their management believed staff would perform working from home, whilst a total of 55.1% agreed that staff would perform while working from home. This could have been because the system was still new or the organisations were not prepared. There was a need to set up reliable systems or controls to improve confidence in the implementation of the working-from-home system.

Only 46.1% of the respondents indicated that companies provided guidelines on how information was shared by staff when working from home. There was a need to improve on this since a significant number of employees indicated that there were no clear guidelines on information dissemination.

Teamwork was also viewed to be possible even though people were working from different geographical locations, with a total of 55.1% of the respondents in agreement with this. Hence the need to establish technological systems that encouraged virtual teamwork.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to investigate the extent to which Zimbabwean organisations in Harare were prepared for homeworking and the challenges and opportunities presented by homeworking. The study then proposed strategies to optimise employee performance during homeworking. The findings of the study led to the following conclusions in relation to coping strategies that could be adopted during working from home. The study concluded that employees were disciplined when working from home and therefore needed to maintain that stance to ensure that the new norm of homeworking reaped positive results. The study also concluded that working from home did not prevent the execution of jobs; instead, it encouraged work-life balance and hence, this was a positive stride to organisations since the total effective implementation of homeworking could boost productivity through facilitating work-life balance. This study concluded that self-discipline, work-life balance, personality of employees, technical support, critical working from home enablers and organisational preparedness were key factors that could boost employee performance during working from home. This study also identified several challenges faced by people working from home that hindered the optimum

performance of employees. The study indicated that keeping a regular work schedule when working from home was problematic, pointing to the need for timetables for crucial feedback and questions and encouraging employees to stick to work schedules. The study also indicated that a significant number of employees still needed support in handling computer challenges at home. Considering the findings above, the study recommended that organisations should have a facility to assist employees working from home to deal with computer glitches. In terms of promoting work-life balance while homeworking, training employees on ways to improve work-life balance was recommended, as well as creating opportunities for virtual interaction with workmates. The other recommendations suggested included management training employees on improving their patience and self-confidence when working from home. In order to make working from home as fun as working in an office and to avoid productivity loss due to power outages, it was also crucial to offer equipment, dependable computers, a sufficient power supply and internet connections. It was also important that organisations consider the nature of jobs when requesting employees to work from home. The other strategies for organisations that might enhance the success of working from home included footing costs emanating from working from home, management needs to establish reliable communication systems and control systems to make that system effective and proper virtual training were enforced. The adoption of these recommendations could go a long way in navigating the challenges of homeworking and leveraging the opportunities presented by homeworking, thereby optimising employee performance during homeworking.

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