

Performance Management in the Virtual Workplace During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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Abstract— Previous research has either neglected to consider misbehaviour or misconduct in the virtual workplace during the current COVID-19 pandemic or highlighted some challenges encountered with remote working or work from home but in isolation, e.g., misbehaviours or ethical concerns associated with improper use of technology when accessing clients' confidential information, without understanding their aetiology and context in a holistic manner. This has impacted the ability of existing research in providing recommendations organisations can practically implement to improve the sustainability and productivity of the virtual workplace, especially as they seek to navigate the current pandemic and prepare for the global business environment in the next decade. Instead, this study, for the first time, proposes a novel holistic methodology to identify the aetiologies of ethical and performance challenges with focus to the Information Technology consulting sector, as well as developing a set of recommendations companies can adopt to manage such behavioural and productivity challenges. Thus, this study illustrates the key issues associated with remote working implemented to respond to the current COVID-19 pandemic, which mine not only the individual performance in an organisation but also its overall productivity, as well as suggests the main performance and reward management strategies that can be leveraged to mitigate them. Tailored strategies are described and discussed as referred to this industry to help in navigating a more unstable yet competitive market to manage the virtual employees' misbehaviours in the workplace and drive growth for individuals and organisations alike.

Keywords—*Performance Management; COVID-19; Virtual Workplace; Trust-Based Working; Business Continuity; Pandemic.*

1 INTRODUCTION

This study provides a critical analysis of the key challenges to the sustainability and productivity of virtual workplaces due to employees' misbehaviour or misconduct, with particular focus to how organisations can navigate the current COVID-19 pandemic and the global business environment in the next decade. Both performance and reward management strategies are considered, including their effectiveness and impact, and related business theories and concepts. Furthermore, key discussions are described, explaining how a set of recommendations can be derived to manage employees' misbehaviour when working from home and drive growth for organisations in a more competitive business environment. The main business strategies companies can adopt for performance and reward management are outlined, with focus to the Information Technology consulting industry.

Following the implementation of remote working or work from home in several multi-national information technology (IT) consulting companies for business continuity in the current COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020), employees carry on working from home (BCG, 2020; Gottlieb et al., 2020), despite the associated misbehaviours in virtual workplaces (Diab-Bahman, & Al-Enzi, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). However, to safeguard employees' experience, organisations need to manage such misconduct and any discriminative behaviours beyond simply setting policies (Agba et al., 2020). Leaving employees' misbehaviours unresolved may lead to increases in employee turnover and lawsuits, also decreasing employee morale and impacting productivity and profits negatively (BBC, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Thompson, 2020).

As misbehaviours can be hard to discern, it is thus important to train employees who work from home to recognise subtle misconduct and feel safe in reporting it promptly. Performance management-related incentives can be put in place to facilitate this process. Managers may require only some team members to turn their cameras on during meetings, whilst leaving others with the freedom to choose whether to do so (Beckmann et al., 2017). They may perceive employees' security behaviour differently based on discriminative factors, such as age, gender (Giddens et al., 2020) and ethnicity. Moreover, considering a more informal atmosphere when working remotely or from home (BCG, 2020), employees may be induced in offending other colleagues with inappropriate assertions (BBC, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Thompson, 2020).

Therefore, defining such misbehaviours, educating remote workers on how to discern and report them, being aware of any related disciplinary actions, is essential to ensure such misconducts are managed effectively (Grange et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). In IT consulting companies, employees can report misbehaviours via various channels, such as company's web portals, phone apps and dedicated email addresses (BBC, 2020; BCG, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Thompson, 2020). The organisational code of ethics must be translated into taking any necessary actions in response to evidence supporting any allegations regarding such misbehaviours, to ensure an inclusive and diverse workplace, for business continuity (Gottlieb et al., 2020) and to protect organisations and their clients (BBC, 2020; BCG, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Thompson, 2020).

2 ETHICAL ISSUES RELATED TO EMPLOYEE MISBEHAVIOUR

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some managers expect their remote employees to be more productive due to less distractions and lack of commuting (i-Sight, 2020), whilst some others may reduce their workload considering communication-related challenges (Diab-Bahman, & Al-Enzi, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). This poses fundamental ethical concerns as to whether employees are treated fairly.

Human resource (HR) departments in IT consulting companies track and review the use of corporate devices (Newlands et al., 2020) to ensure employees' behaviour is aligned with acceptable use policies. However, some employees may use their company devices for personal projects (i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020). In some cases, remote workers may claim expenses incurred in buying software to perform their corporate work, whilst also using it for personal use (i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020).

Fraudulent behaviour may also occur with remote employees logging more hours on their company portal than those they worked for (Diab-Bahman, & Al-Enzi, 2020; i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Working remotely may increase the problem of sick leave fraud, as nobody can usually question the symptoms reported by the employees (i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020).

Particularly during the current pandemic, remote employees must fulfil their ethical obligations, safeguarding their clients' interests and data throughout any virtual exchanges by leveraging appropriate media and security policies. Especially when outsourcing any IT consulting work in multi-national companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, rigorous IT development and deployment guidelines must be strictly followed to ensure confidentiality of clients' data (i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020).

Ethically, these principles can be enforced by remembering that the responsibility for any IT consulting services outsourced cannot be delegated (Demmou et al., 2020). In fact, IT consulting organisations need to ensure the conduct of their contractors complies with their policies and standards. Moreover, clients need to be made aware of the intention of an organisation to outsource any IT consulting services and the required client consent needs to be obtained beforehand. If an IT consulting company provides services in healthcare to clients operating in European Union too, besides the 'General Data Protection Regulation' (GDPR) (Voigt & Von dem Bussche, 2017), the 'Medical Device Regulation' (MDR) or 'In Vitro Diagnostic Regulation' (IVDR) (Pesapane et al., 2018), would need to be followed should the software be processing any personal data related to EU citizens either with a medical device or for in vitro diagnostics (O'Connor, 2020).

Thus, data security is indeed an important ethical concern not only from a business standpoint but also from a technical one during the COVID-19 pandemic with employees working from home. Appropriate cybersecurity must be also in place to protect any confidential organisational and client data (Abukari & Bankas, 2020; Demmou et al., 2020). Organisations have the ethical responsibility of training their remote workers in being aware of cyberthreats, to identify and prevent them (Abukari & Bankas, 2020). Employees need to be educated in installing anti-virus and anti-ransomware software, using corporate or client-approved virtual private networks (VPNs), keeping their operating system up to date, locking their company's computer screen when away from the desk, backing up important files regularly but on the right medium. Ransomware has become a widespread form of cyberattack for IT consulting firms and the best antidote against this is keeping both people and technologies up to date (O'Connor, 2020).

Employers have the ethical obligation to test the knowledge of their remote employees by letting them complete some awareness courses and tests, and by sending emails that should be flagged as potential phishing attacks. In fact, most data breaches are not due to technological vulnerabilities but to user error (Demmou et al., 2020; O'Connor, 2020).

3 PERFORMANCE CHALLENGES AND THEIR IMPACT ON ORGANISATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

Working remotely, as briefly mentioned in Section 2, may lead to lower productivity for some employees, who may struggle cooperating with their colleagues via virtual tools, such as phone and emails. Moreover, distractions in their home may also decrease their productivity, prioritising their house chores over business tasks (Gorlick, 2020; i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020).

Furthermore, about 50% of remote workers mention their wellbeing has deteriorated (i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020), impacting their physical and mental health negatively (Grant et al., 2013), especially considering working from home may be associated with poor exercise and diet. Some workers are lonely and may not be self-motivated (Gorlick, 2020), ending up blending business and personal hours throughout their day (OECD, 2020), leading to isolation, not being connected to their colleagues and ineffective communication, impacting performance and wellbeing too (**Fig. 1**, Wang et al., 2021).

Communication is often impersonal (Bloom et al., 2014), as it mainly relates to specific business goals. Such disconnection (Li et al., 2020) may at times improve productivity on individual tasks but also impair the cohesiveness of teams and the progress on collaborative tasks (**Fig. 2**; BCG, 2020), thus creating unnecessary conflicts too. Especially during these unprecedented times, it is important to remember the importance of cooperation and socialisation towards a virtuous knowledge cycle in an organisation to enhance value delivered, such as via the ‘Socialisation-Externalisation-Combination-Internationalisation’ (SECI) model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Being unable to personally see their colleagues and manager may also make them doubt about their skills (Espinoza and Reznikova, 2020) and performance (OECD, 2020), leading to anxiety and depression in some severe cases. As employees may also be worried about their job security (Boeri et al., 2020), their sleep may be disrupted, ultimately impacting their productivity further (Gorlick, 2020; i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020).

In this isolated atmosphere, corporate culture is often not experienced and remote employees often receive corporate news only via official announcements, which, overall, may lead to decreased focus and negative attrition in the long term. Besides the ethical implications of excessive performance monitoring mentioned in Section 2, the performance of some remote employees may be influenced negatively if they feel they are being overly monitored (i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020).

Moreover, remote work poses challenges to the traditional performance management system large IT consulting companies have with yearly cadence, as it may be too late to manage talents effectively (Wang et al., 2021) via this conventional format, given that these talents require shorter, more frequent performance reviews instead. Indeed, continuous performance management has been advocated by many as being one of the traits of the learning organisation in the literature (Easterby-Smith et al., 1999) and it should be now the most appropriate time to put it into action as a framework, such as the ‘Innate Lesson Cycle’ (ADIIEA, Lewis, 2014), retaining and nurturing skilled individuals that constitute some of the brightest minds IT consulting companies have (i-Sight, 2020; Weir Consulting, 2020).

4 RECOMMENDATIONS TO MANAGE BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES IN THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

Despite the ethical and performance challenges commonly encountered with remote employees, as described in Sections 2 and 3, remote work can be led to be productive by fostering employee engagement (Baker, 2020; Hart, 2020). Regular conversations and implicit observations from colleagues are useful to discern signs of concern or distress in employees when working remotely. Creating a supportive environment around remote workers, empathically connecting with them (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017), allowing flexible work models (Beckmann et al., 2017; Mas & Pallais, 2017; Mas & Pallais, 2020), including trust-based working (TBW) time (Viète & Erdsiek, 2018; **Fig. 3**; OECD, 2020), are not only important to manage virtual workplaces, but also to improve their productivity and foster innovation (Godart et al., 2017; Hart, 2020).

This atmosphere would encourage and reward employees for speaking up when needed, enhancing employees' satisfaction and productivity (Beckmann et al., 2017; Mas and Pallais, 2017; Wheatley, 2017; Viète & Erdsiek, 2018; Mas & Pallais, 2020) (**Fig. 4**; OECD, 2020), thus ensuring attrition is kept to a minimum (Baker, 2020).

Employees in IT consulting companies should be equipped with the required technology to work effectively when remotely, paying attention at specific hardware and cloud necessities some employees working with computationally intensive software may require. Virtual communications (Bloom et al., 2014; Hart, 2020) should be kept professional and respectful of all employees, training everyone in knowing how to report and manage ineffective virtual interactions (EY Belgium, 2020; Wang et al., 2021), e.g., avoiding multiple emails and resolving any conversations faster in a virtual meeting (Baker, 2020; Bohns, 2017; Roghanizad & Bohns, 2017).

A two-way, horizontal communication between managers and employees can promote engagement further. When employees are made aware of organisational decisions and their consequences in time, they are more likely to get involved and support the organisation for longer, also joining side-of-desk activities. Being able to share both positive and negative feelings employees have during this extraordinary situation with their managers can help them feel understood and not be worried about their job security either (Baker, 2020; Boeri et al., 2020; Hart, 2020).

Ultimately, trusting that the employees will act ethically, whilst offering them the required support throughout these unprecedented times, can empower them to avoid and prevent any misbehaviours in them and their colleagues (Baker, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020). Especially during this pandemic, the importance of employees as stakeholders cannot be overstated. Reminding them of their organisational values with managers who can inspire them as role models can boost their experience of the company culture and ultimately boost productivity. Managers should support employees when speaking up to report any misconducts via appropriate channels, since they seem to have increased by about 33% during the pandemic (Baker, 2020). This atmosphere can foster wellbeing at work and increase psychological safety (Grant et al., 2013; Prasad et al., 2020), benefiting companies to become more and more like 'learning organisations' and better prepared for any disruptions or disasters the future may hold (Baker, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020).

It is fundamental to highlight how the employees' work, upskilling and cross-skilling contribute to achieve organisational goals and contribute towards it being a 'learning organisation' further, minimising anxiety that may be associated with job security during these unprecedented times (Baker, 2020; Boeri et al., 2020; EY Belgium, 2020). Moreover, considering people may be juggling work and family in their homes (**Fig. 5**, Eddleston & Mulki, 2017), managers should allow employees to perform their work at schedules at which they are most productive (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

Thus, collaborative virtual sessions, such as pair programming, should be scheduled at a mutually convenient time. Therefore, managers should focus less on processes and more on whether goals have been accomplished (Baker, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020).

In these times of disruption, employees are 30% more likely to want recognition for their contributions (Baker, 2020). Prompt and effective performance-based recognition motivates the employee who receives it, as well as other colleagues who would be more incentivised to emulate such high-achievers. Moreover, recognition does not have to involve any monetary compensation, as acknowledgements of an employee's achievements within the team and across multiple, wider teams, along with recognition points and/or cost-effective vouchers, may suffice (Baker, 2020).

Furthermore, as a true 'learning organisation', managers should reward employees with opportunities for continuous professional development, involving paid training courses, including those online, and paths to get their skills certified. Leveraging both surveys and direct conversations with their own reports, managers can track the outputs delivered, along with understanding whom and how to recognise (Baker, 2020; Hart, 2020).

High-performance employees should be engaged further with innovative initiatives to contribute to the organisational success in the longer term. Managers should identify them and provide them with opportunities to innovate progressively or allow them to provide inputs towards process improvements, allowing them to fail safely and early, and to be recognised even earlier for the value delivered (Baker, 2020; EY Belgium, 2020; Hart, 2020).

5 CONCLUSION

This study critically analysed the employee misbehaviour challenges associated with work from home and remote working policies implemented for business continuity in the current COVID-19 pandemic in Section 1, considering associated ethical issues in Section 2 and highlighting related performance-related challenges in Section 3. Eventually, in Section 4, recommendations to manage such behavioural challenges were provided.

Analysing the main ethical and performance-related issues associated with remote working made it possible to outline recommendations not only to mitigate its inherent risks during the current pandemic by developing a sustainable learning organisation, but also to establish solid foundations for the future of work with flexible work models and enhanced productivity.

DECLARATION

Availability of data and material

The authors declare all data and materials in this study have been appropriately referenced where needed.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

First and corresponding author: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Roles/Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

Second author: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Re-sources; Software; Validation; Roles/Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

Third author: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Software; Validation; Roles/Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

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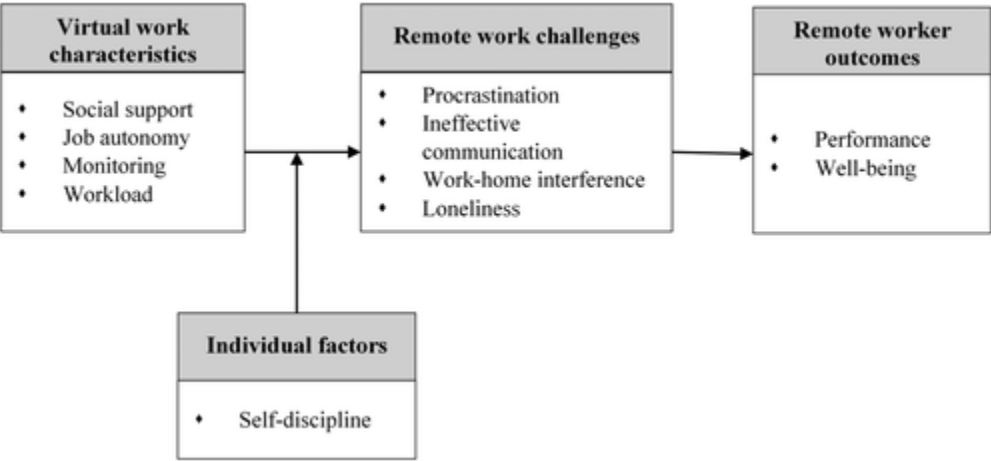


Figure 1. Remote working and associated challenges influencing employees’ performance and outcomes (Wang et al., 2021).



Figure 2. Improved productivity with remote working inconsistent on collaborative tasks (BCG, 2020).

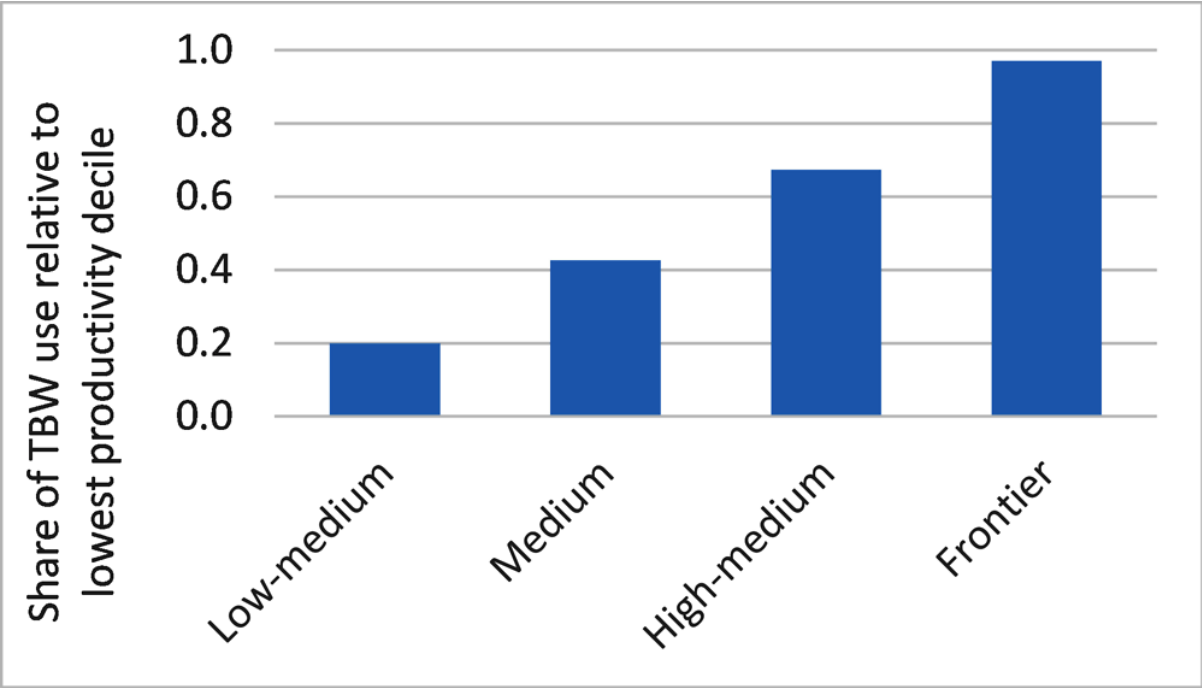


Figure 3. Trust-based working time schedule (TBW) enhances efficiency (OECD, 2020).

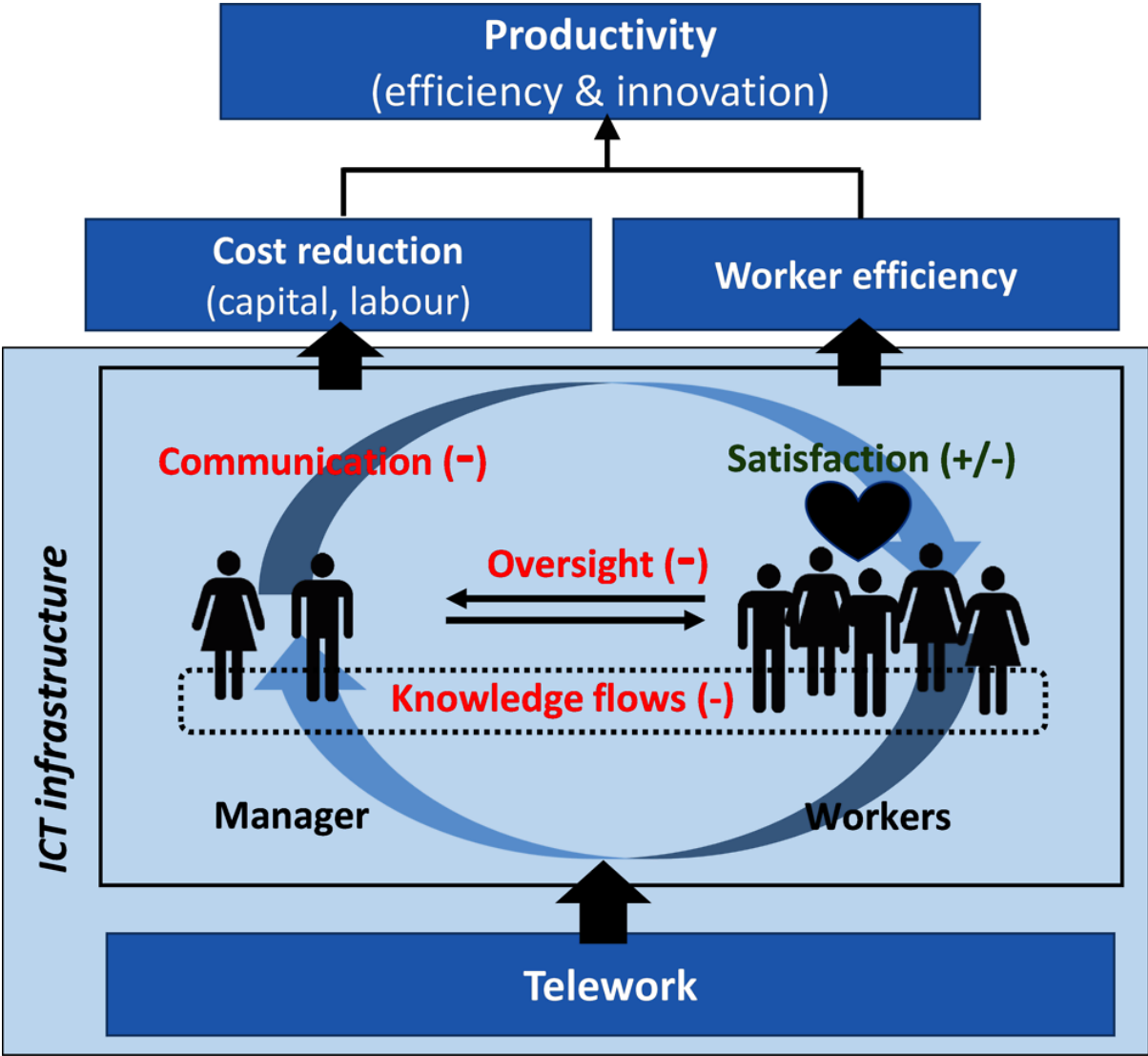


Figure 4. The main channels of remote work and productivity (OECD, 2020).

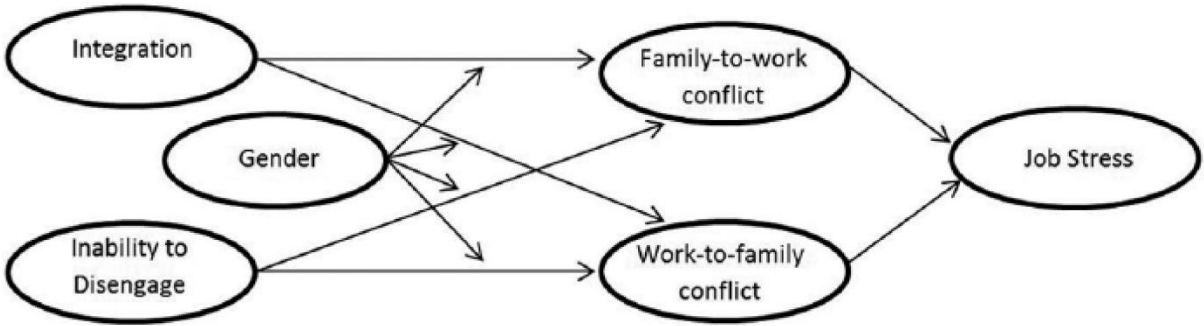


Figure 5. Factors contributing to job-related stress when working remotely (Eddleston and Mulki, 2017).

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