

Impact of Remote Work on Team Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a widespread shift to remote work, prompting an urgent need to understand its implications for team dynamics. This paper examines how remote work has redefined team structures, interpersonal communication, trust, collaboration, cohesion, and leadership, particularly among software development teams. Drawing from secondary analysis of qualitative survey data and a review of current literature, this study examines key cultural and operational changes that have emerged in remote and hybrid team settings. The findings highlight both the opportunities and challenges of remote work, including the erosion of spontaneous collaboration, the complexities of virtual communication, the importance of trust and accountability, and the evolving role of leadership. By understanding how remote work influences team productivity and relationships, this study contributes to the development of adaptive strategies that promote effective remote collaboration and organizational resilience in the digital age.

Keywords: Remote Work, Team Dynamics, COVID-19, Communication, Trust, Software Development Teams, Hybrid Work.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has accelerated the shift to remote work in various industries, especially among software developers, who have largely transitioned to remote work this year. This separation from colleagues is expected to change team dynamics, potentially impacting productivity. Existing literature highlights crucial team culture factors such as communication, camaraderie, and cohesion. A secondary analysis of PhD research has been undertaken using a pre-existing online platform to gather survey responses, leveraging surveys for their cost- and time-efficient data collection. There is a specific interest in examining the cultures of isolated development teams formed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Qualitative survey responses can provide insights into team cultures and common tools, which are challenging to investigate through qualitative means alone. Three key survey aims emerged: exploring vital team culture factors, identifying influences on software development teams working remotely, and assessing the prevalence of team-specific factors that impact productivity. It is anticipated that significant insights can be derived from these datasets, highlighting the importance of this research in today's context [1, 2].

Defining Remote Work

Over the last two years, large numbers of employees have started working from home (WFH) full-time. Working from home has pros and cons for employees, management, and working teams. Not all employees experience the same (dis)advantages regarding performance and well-being when working from home. Insights into these contingent effects for individuals, teams, and organizations can inform policies on distance working arrangements in the new future of work. Working from home refers to doing all work from home rather than from another location and implies working within a legally set number of working hours. Researching these distance working arrangements is relevant because of their substantial and enduring impact on working life. Findings of a large-scale workplace survey carried out before and during the COVID-19 pandemic are presented, specifically focusing on working from home in eight countries, eight organizations, and over 1,000 teams in various industries. Team performance is a key focus because it remains poorly understood in contemporary organizational studies that investigate distance working arrangements. However, research into team performance provides a relevant entry point for assessing the macro-level consequences of considerable numbers of employees working from home [3, 4].

Historical Context of Remote Work

In 1973, Jack Niles coined the term "telecommuting," leading to the conception of remote work. His proposal included the idea of distributed workplaces, which is now referred to as remote work. With it, employees have the ability to work from anywhere, as long as they have internet access. Recently, research on working from home (WFH) has risen. The COVID-19 pandemic's push for WFH has turned into a larger debate on companies making the transition permanent. There are plenty of benefits for both employees and employers. Employees are saved from long commutes to and from work, combined with money and gas expenses. Companies no longer need large office buildings and are able to hire the best talent from any location. However, WFH does present challenges for employees, including working increased hours. Although there is a fine line between flexible hours and being expected to always be working, many employees feel burned out by working from home. In this new WFH environment, it is hard for managers to manage their teams effectively and to remain in touch with their employees. Additionally, the team dynamics and teamwork can also be significantly impacted. As teams become more geographically distributed, collaboration and coordination suffer. The effect of temporal distribution on teams reveals that it impacts the distribution of communication response times, making them longer for distributed teams. Examined challenges faced by developers working from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic and found feeling overworked to be one of the biggest challenges. For team dynamics, WFH is more focused on team culture factors, and team coordination and communication are some of the most significant challenges developers' teams face [5, 6].

Team Dynamics Explained

The remote-first working environment is still an open discussion. There are positive and negative sides to a remote-first work environment. Inside the positive aspects, in terms of productivity, even in a remote environment, software engineers kept their pace compared to the office, which proves well-organized remote teams can still be as productive as they were on-site. But it is also stated that overall productivity has declined. The subjective perception of productivity has changed. The struggles associated with working with a remote-first team are among the reasons which affect this decline. Harmony within the remote team is one of the biggest challenges of a remote-first working environment. It is stated that influential factors that make it challenging to have harmony within the remote team are team trust and dynamics. Team trust might be the hardest challenge to embrace for remote teams. We tend not to trust people we have just met at the beginning. This process becomes even more challenging when people/teams have their first meeting via online platforms. Warm welcomes or icebreaker activities are usually enough to break the trust barrier in a physical meeting. However, it is a struggle to accomplish this in a remote environment. Even if all team members had a long interaction history before going remote, a remote-first work environment can still be challenging. People naturally act more distant and tend to stay in their own space if they don't see someone in physical presence for a long time. Team dynamics play a key role in having a healthier working environment. Everyone needs to know their boundaries and areas to participate effectively in a teamwork process [7, 8].

Communication in Remote Teams

Communication is critical for effective team dynamics in organizations. Oftentimes, a lack of communication can lead to wasted time and duplicated efforts. For remote teams, maintaining communication has become a greater challenge. Remote teams often encounter the challenge of diverse and widely distributed locations. In a remote team, members are spread across different locations. This could mean that some team members are hours apart. This also means different team members could be working in different time zones. "Working across time zones directly clashes with traditional forms of co-location," and often, the close-knit relationship that is usually formed with co-location in the same time zone is harder to achieve. Technology has made it easier to keep informed about what team members are working on and what to expect of their environment as a way of keeping communication not only with the Direct Report but also with team members. Even with an easy way of reaching other members in more traditional communication methods, keeping up communication is still important. Regular meetings directly with team members and reviews have proven to be helpful. Keeping a communication channel open for report exchanges and questions without needing to set up a meeting makes things easier for the team members. Some technologies can include messaging services. It is important to keep team members in the loop of running information; otherwise, members could be working on things that other members have already worked on or found solutions to. Using the proper tool with the right usage is imperative; otherwise, it may feel overwhelming, lost, or alone at work. With the consistency of using the same tool, it may develop trust and feel confident to move about a task [9, 10].

Trust and Accountability

Effective teams are built on trust, and trust is built over time. Vulnerability and accountability are built on trust; only when team members trust each other will they be willing to make themselves vulnerable in front of each other. The accountability one team member has for another is only possible if there is enough trust among team members to hold each other accountable, meaning that everyone has a zone of comfort in which to operate. Remote working disrupts that connection. A common challenge brought about by remote working is that people do not get to know each other. Since it is difficult to establish a rapport with someone, one team member is less likely to hold another team member accountable, creating a culture of “it’s fine, I’ll do it myself”. This loss of team accountability can spiral further, worsening the feeling of disconnection one member feels from the rest of the team. Miles of distance make every interaction deliberate; when those interactions happen, it is negatively effective to turn those frameworks into “business-only” meetings. In this remote world, it has become exceedingly important to account for not just work relationships but also personal relationships. Taking the time for non-work-related meetings provides the opportunity for the team to build rapport; this will hopefully allow the space to maintain accountability. Enforcing accountability limits “it’s fine, I’ll do it myself” situations and encourages members to sort out their work without outside help, allowing workloads to build and spiral out of control. By conducting regular 1-on-1 check-ins, members will get the opportunity to discuss personal accountability with a larger team member. Regular team check-ins, both sports and non-sports related, give the entire team the chance to engage in team accountability, encouraging the notion of all being in one boat [11, 12].

Collaboration Challenges

Collaboration is essential for any work team, but distance can impact it significantly. Recently, teams adapted to remote collaboration due to virtual meeting technologies. During a discussion moderated by B. G. Corry, panelists shared their experiences managing remote agile teams and ensuring collaboration. Initially, participants sought advice on managing distributed teams, but the current scenario differs as teams became geographically distributed due to the pandemic without prior preparation. Managers lacked a roadmap for this sudden shift. Task forces emphasized maintaining routines and continuing collaboration through remote stand-up meetings. Although the panelists had effective practices like screen sharing and workload monitoring, managing teams remotely became increasingly difficult. One-on-one electronic check-ins could not replace in-person interactions, and scheduling these meetings was challenging. Panelists noted changes in work styles due to distance, with Zoom fatigue becoming a real issue as most meetings occurred via video. Multi-mode meetings posed additional challenges, leading to more background noise and less engagement during audio-only sessions. Intentionally boosting team morale became necessary, and members increasingly shared personal aspects of their lives, fostering a sense of inclusion and inspiration from their stories. Navigating different time zones and schedules proved complicated, especially with young children at home vying for attention. Queries about absenteeism, though well-intentioned, risked sounding intrusive. Team dynamics evolved as Silicon Valley’s influence spread globally, complicating the workplace’s adjustment to remote arrangements. Large video calls often descended into chaos, making it difficult to focus on a few speakers. Despite compressed timeframes, work hours are extended, leading to burnout. Some teams established “office hours” to encourage disconnection and define quiet periods outside working hours [13, 14].

Impact on Team Cohesion

A hybrid work configuration tends to bring attenuations in team trust and cohesion, dynamics that seem to be more negative the more co-workers work in a hybrid fashion. Some workers might feel like they have their team physical distance ‘out of sight, out of mind’, while other team members feel lost on team events simply because they were on vacation. Specifically, barriers to cohesive teams working in a hybrid environment regard the type and frequency of attendees on meetings, differing perceptions around task- and work-ownership, and groupthink. Addressing something that is also quite business essential, team trust has been notably impacted in hybrid environments. Both increased and decreased trust, perceptions around task ownership and accountability, and dynamics between on-site and remote workers appear as central themes in this respect. A potential benefit to team trust in hybrid environments is a newfound understanding of each other’s work situations, for example, the influence of geographical situations and family dynamics on task scheduling. Changes in trust-building initiatives and cohesion techniques are also reported, switching focus from physical presence techniques to structured follow-ups and team-bonding events. The hybrid work environment impacts that are currently being described signify some idea of environmental adoption factors. Thorough team handovers, a structured onboarding of new team members, documenting team knowledge by means of wikis, accelerated reporting of meeting outcomes,

and agreeing on the necessity and manner of recurring meetings are elements capturing the essence of independent adaptability [15, 16].

Leadership in Remote Teams

Working between the home and the office has become the norm, or "hybrid working," around the globe. Its rise has brought about noticeable changes in the relationship among employees, the leadership of teams, and the mechanics of cooperation. Firms are responding to employees' desires for working from home (WFH) in their future work models. These changes in employee perspectives, working locations, and potentially work rhythms are widely expected to have consequences for team dynamics, i.e., how teams relate to each other with regard to their working approaches, compared to before. Workplaces are heterogeneous in terms of the nature of tasks, the need for in-person collaboration, the compatibility of working styles, and managerial cultures. Nevertheless, the anticipated universal transition from full office attendance to flexible WFH significantly impacted how teams interacted. This change resulted in inevitable behavioral and communicational effects, which raised the question of whether team dynamics fundamentally changed from how they were before. To find a satisfying depiction of how teamwork styles varied around the globe, a representative subject of substantial economic importance, several particular case studies of firms from different industries and countries were collected. In summary, it can be stated that, in general, teams divided their work between remote and face-to-face activities if tasks were divisible. Upon working fully remotely, teams adopted different management systems, which led to redefined roles for middle management and collective sense-making. Nonetheless, the transition was uneven and characterized by opposition and divergence rather than instant pursuit of a single idea. Research on team dynamics in the remote and hybrid setting is novel. Hence, the results inform firms of what to expect from such transitions. At the same time, the present study emphasizes the limitations that arise in online qualitative research and provides suggestions for how to support this method in further research endeavors [17, 18].

Performance Measurement

Productivity can be measured in quantitative ways, such as lines of code, or qualitatively, like well-being. A common view of remote work suggests that employees may not be working and focus on personal activities, termed the "McDonaldization of the Workforce." Terms like "Zoom fatigue" highlight the burnout from constant video calls. Asynchronous communication reduces the need to constantly check calendars. Self-reported productivity among remote engineers varies, with personal preference significantly influencing their experiences. Benefits of remote work include eliminating commutes and fewer spontaneous conversations. Transitioning to fully remote environments reveals challenges with methodologies like Scrum, which thrive on physical presence. Simple communications, like discussing questions next to a coworker, change dramatically when teams are remote, with communication becoming a bottleneck for effective agile environments. While higher well-being often correlates with better employee performance, numerous factors influence general well-being. The reduction of stressful commutes positively impacts remote workers' well-being, but constant Zoom calls can lead to feelings of social isolation. Evidence shows that when 50% of coworkers work from home at least once a month, individual performance decreases by 38% of the sample standard deviation. Job characteristics like autonomy, satisfaction, and commitment greatly influence performance, while extended remote hours can harm managers' ratings of team performance [19, 20].

Employee Well-Being and Remote Work

The exploratory analysis of employees' well-being in telework emphasizes the social and emotional dimensions of individuals, including relational communication, emotions, workload, and work-life balance. It analyzes employees' objective emotional and social states alongside subjective feelings such as resentment or pleasure, focusing on four key dimensions: relational communication, emotional wellbeing, work-life balance, and work intensity. A literature review on emotional well-being in telework reveals various measures linked to these dimensions. Research highlights the impact of relational communication on employee well-being in remote work. Effective communication systems and social relationships are vital for organizational functioning and team dynamics. As teleworking becomes standard, ongoing studies examine how these variables enhance well-being and job satisfaction amidst the shift from traditional environments. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many employees into telework without proper preparation, prompting initial studies to explore the risks and well-being factors that emerged due to blurred work-life boundaries. Research indicates that during the pandemic, employees often felt isolated from their organizations, suggesting that successful telecommuting relies on effective organizational communication. Using structural equation models, studies focused on employees new to remote work during COVID-19 to assess the impact of telecommuting on relational communication and wellbeing perceptions [21, 22].

Technology's Role in Remote Work

This report examines the impact of working from home (WFH) due to COVID-19 on software development teams. We conducted a survey to gather insights about developers' remote work experiences, focusing on team communication, productivity, and satisfaction. A total of 2,469 software developers worldwide responded. Initially, the WFH policy seemed to enhance communication among many engineers; however, this improvement has deteriorated over time, with a growing number reporting negative effects. Trust among team members has also declined for numerous respondents. Many believe the WFH policy will have a lasting impact on team dynamics, as complexities regarding ownership and accountability have emerged. The pandemic urged companies to implement WFH policies, which vary in execution but share common attributes. By analyzing communication and productivity metrics, our study assesses the effects of the WFH policy on development teams. Although many expected WFH to boost communication at the outset, this positive trend has faded, leading to concerns about communication obstacles. Likewise, the trust among team members has noticeably diminished among significant portions of engineers. Responses indicate engineers foresee long-term changes in team dynamics due to the complexities introduced by remote work. Collaboration is crucial in software development, requiring cohesive teamwork. Communication takes various forms face-to-face meetings, chats, code reviews, and commit messages, either synchronously or asynchronously. Effective communication fosters a better understanding of projects and enhances productivity. Successful teamwork often correlates with improved performance, emphasizing the importance of maintaining communication and trust within teams [23, 24].

Future of Remote Work

In roughly 25 years, remote work was either a totally foreign experience or a desired perk to a few companies, but it now seems ubiquitous in the workplace. In March of 2020, businesses and organizations worldwide were forced to move to a remote-first format due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rollout of CDC guidelines. Necessary technology like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack became widely adopted overnight, and with these new platforms, developed new etiquette, challenges, and complexities. The pandemic created an unforeseen natural experiment for companies and researchers alike to assess the impacts of a remote-first environment on team dynamics, employee well-being, and productivity, and the challenges that came with such a fast-paced transition. The results are complex, with many companies embracing a hybrid model with employees reporting to the office a few days a week in a hot-desk format, allowing employees more autonomy over their work schedules. As the pandemic subsides, many companies have mandated employees return to the office full-time. This has led to the beginning of a trend referred to as "The Great Resignation" or "The Big Quit," with record numbers of workers seeking new opportunities or simply quitting. The most common sentiment expressed for this mass exodus is a newfound appreciation for the flexibility a remote-first environment provided. As a result, companies are torn between the demand from the workforce for remote-first work and the awareness of the ramifications this has on the company culture. Follow-up interviews conducted allowed for a more in-depth look into the positive and negative aspects of a remote-first work environment. In general, companies that provided remote-first access were very much behind the curve pre-pandemic. The switch to a remote-first company required a series of different discussions, assessments, and pivots from the pre-pandemic ways of life [25, 26].

Case Studies

With the widespread shift to work from home (WFH) due to COVID-19, a natural experiment has occurred for researchers to evaluate the effects of WFH on software development teams, their dynamics, and interactions. With rapidly changing tools, practices, and team dynamics across the globe, it is essential to curate and make sense of valuable data to better understand this unforeseen experiment. In this work, survey results are presented from over 200 software developers in diverse settings worldwide. The goal is to investigate how collaboration and team dynamics have changed pre/post switch to WFH. There was a noted decrease in social connection with team members. Developers note perceptions that restricting individual team connections is damaging overall collaborations. There were also perceived changes in communication practices and styles, which are understood to form team dynamics. There were mixed results on whether developers feel a decreased ability to brainstorm with colleagues. Work can address how team productivity is manifested and what other factors not addressed in this work might be critical. To begin to measure how team dynamics and interactions have changed due to WFH, knowledge surrounding team productivity is first reviewed. This knowledge describes the composition of developer activities and the interdependence of these activities. Team members work together to plan and track the broader software process while simultaneously organizing and executing their work. While WFH, there is a decreased ability to track other team members outside of scheduled meetings. On team productivity,

for a variety of reasons, one developer's exchanges of information and feedback can greatly affect the productivity of their teammate(s). How a developer conducts their individual work can have cascading effects on the rest of their team. Developers can either block or unblock each other, and therefore either allow their work to be made or delay the software process. The research studies the effects of remote-first working environments on productivity and developer experience. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of teams worked in a hybrid environment with some co-located developers and some entirely remote members. However, soon after March 12, 2020, most teams were exclusively remote overnight. A survey-based approach is taken to gather input from a participant pool of mostly developers, asking about remote-first experiences, productivity, barriers to productivity, communication and interaction, collaboration impacts, and daily schedules. Overall, the findings suggest evenly distributed productivity pre- and post-pandemic knowledge work. However, personal sentiments, social communications, and team interactions differ dramatically under distributed conditions [27, 28].

Best Practices for Remote Teams

Remote teams can enhance productivity across time zones when managed well. Conversely, poor management leads to difficulties in establishing working norms. Distributed teams can utilize the code review process to teach new languages and avoid failures. Encouraging no-deep-meeting weeks, new members partake in team coffee meetings and dinners to understand team culture. Managers align working hours with developers' main time zones for full availability and effective stand-ups, while team members rotate operational roles bi-weekly. However, cultural differences may constrain distributed teams more than in-person teams. Poor management can hinder collaboration with adjacent teams, resulting in risky designs and ineffective implementations. Miscommunication often causes frustrating out-of-sync deployments. Ineffective retrospective meetings lead to unresolved issues and repeated accountability complaints, revealing weaknesses in designs. The remote-first environment continues to be debated, with varied impacts and practices noted. Productivity levels for software engineers remain stable in remote settings versus on-site. In contrast, job satisfaction appears lower, with more negative experiences reported in remote work. Although regular meetings occur, informal social interactions are limited, weakening personal connections among team members. Overall productivity has suffered, attributed to miscommunication and team dynamic challenges, complicating the development of a cohesive remote team. Building effective team dynamics remains a critical question, even beyond remote contexts [29, 30].

CONCLUSION

The shift to remote work has significantly transformed how teams operate, communicate, and maintain cohesion. While it has enabled flexibility and expanded access to talent, it has also introduced notable challenges in fostering trust, ensuring accountability, and sustaining effective collaboration. Team dynamics have become more fragile in the absence of physical presence, making deliberate strategies for communication and rapport-building essential. Leadership plays a pivotal role in bridging the gaps created by distance, ensuring clarity, support, and psychological safety in virtual environments. Ultimately, this research underscores that the future of work will depend on organizations' ability to balance autonomy with structure, digital tools with human connection, and productivity with well-being. As remote and hybrid models become normalized, further research and policy development will be vital to support sustainable and equitable team practices.

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