Flexible Working and Wellbeing in Manufacturing

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SUMMARY

This study aims to assess the impacts working from home has had on employee wellbeing, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using data collected from a flexible working trial within a manufacturing organisation and a mixed method approach, the wellbeing scores between UK lockdown one and lockdown two will be compared, and different demographics considered. The findings revealed that participants experienced various impacts, which both positively and negatively affected their wellbeing.

KEYWORDS

Flexible working, manufacturing, COVID-19

Introduction

Employee wellbeing is an integral part of industry success - increasingly apparent during COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in new working arrangements with most workers experiencing working from home. This study (part of an undergraduate student project) assessed impacts working from home has had on employee wellbeing, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using data collected from a UK manufacturing organisation, analysed using a mixed method approach, the wellbeing impact during UK lockdowns was considered (including personal wellbeing, work engagement, job satisfaction). It is suggested that those who combine home working with work away from home are more productive than those who do not work at home (ONS, 2021). Home working has revealed many benefits over the course of the pandemic, such as better work-life balance, more time for family, increased focus and motivation (CIPD, 2021).

Method

Data was collected from a UK manufacturing organisation (~700 members of staff), during a flexible working (FW) trial (from early 2020). Participants self-selected, with appropriate representation of organisational roles (type and seniority), ages, caring responsibilities and a balance of gender. Diary studies (monthly over a period of 12 months) containing Likert scale and open-ended questions were used. Standard questions banks were used to help investigate workplace wellbeing (personal wellbeing (ONS, 2018), work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003), job satisfaction (Nagy, 2002)). Inductive thematic analysis was selected to examine major impacts participants had associated with their wellbeing. The quantitative analysis tests (Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, Mann Whitney U Test) were used to examine the data collected from the Likert scale questions

From the wider trial, 34 participants (with responses covering both lockdown 1 and lockdown 2) were selected for this study, enabling paired data sets to be compared. This allowed the appropriate

non-parametric tests to be performed, permitting more reliable and accurate results to be obtained. A key stakeholder validation interview was held to review recommendations.

Discussions and Conclusions

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, working from home has revealed a variety of impacts on employee wellbeing. Many people have enjoyed the extra time and flexibility at home, while also suffering from the lack of social interaction and support.

Generally, wellbeing scores dropped around national lockdowns. Although quantitative scores indicated no significant statistical differences, interpretation of qualitative responses show differences were experienced in wellbeing. Thematic analysis identified that impacts on employee wellbeing varied considerably, as a mixture of positive and negative effects were experienced.

Most common positive themes:

- Flexibility (*of lives*, *routine*, *schedule*)
- More time (*with family, to be outside, for other responsibilities*)
- Holiday (relax, recharge, long weekends)
- Good weather (and the opportunity to appreciate it)

Most common negative themes (more prevalent in lockdown 2):

- Working from home (lack of boundaries between work and home, lack of space)
- Long hours (long work days, long hours sat at a computer)
- Workload (over or underloaded, tight deadlines)
- COVID-19 (health, lockdown, restrictions)
- Mental and physical health

The study aimed to provide organisations with guidance to best accommodate FW and to understand how best to support their employees' wellbeing and, therefore, contribute to improved business performance. Recommendations include: investigating appropriate ways to improve communication and engagement for hybrid working; make processes and guidelines clear (e.g. for core hours, rest break policies etc.) at both organisational and local team level; ensure that support and expectations are visible, consistent and fair. Such initiatives would have a higher chance of success, and a bigger impact, with government support. National implementation would support a full understanding of FW and its benefits.

References

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