

(i-COME'20)
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA 2020

**REMOTE WORK: NEW NORMAL COMMUNICATION
CHALLENGES**



Azelin Aziz (a), Mohd Khairie Ahmad (b)*, S. Maartandan Suppiah (c)

*Corresponding author

(a) Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia, azelin@uum.edu.my

(b) Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia, khairie@uum.edu.my

(c) Universiti Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Kampar, Malaysia, maartandan@utar.edu.my

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has forced the majority of organisation to switch their operation to the remote working mode. The existing organisational communication norm was replaced by two new modes, which are: (1) the new normal of digital or (2) virtual communication. This article aims to uncover the challenges and explore potential recommendation of organisational communication practices in the remote work setting. As for that, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen informants consisted of public and private agencies employees. Data were analysed thematically using NVivo software. Infrastructure, expertise and the environment have typically emerged as main topics describing the challenges of practicing organisational communication in remote work setting. In line with that, the results of the interviews have identified several measures such as infrastructure facilities, skills training and policies as the recommendations. The findings also have laid some conceptual ideas in developing model and theory on organisational communication for remote work setting.

2357-1330 © 2021 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Communication ecology, organisational communication, organisational behaviour, work from home



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

The concept of work from home was coined with the presence of new communication technologies at the beginning of the twenty first century. The advancement and rapid innovation of information communication technology have laid promising new work culture and environment (Sull et al., 2020). Although there were many other ideas and innovation that have taken place, such as virtual communication, artificial intelligence, and Industrial Revolution, the remote working has largely come to enforcement due to COVID pandemic. The threat of COVID-19 has imposed the globe into a lockdown. In Malaysia, the March 18, 2020 national lockdown has become the history of the new normal of working among Malaysian. Since then, working remotely or work from home has becoming the practice across almost all work sectors. This paper considers the implications of this new working norm and examines the challenges on organisational communication among the workers.

2. Problem Statement

Flexible work policy has been seen as a mechanism of contributing to the achievement of work life balance. This work concept has increased control of the workers over where and when they work (Aziz & Ahmad, 2016). With the support of communication technology advancement such as computing and Internet, work can be done remotely which reflect the flexibility. This communication innovation has influenced communications at work or within organisation. Decades of studies have shown communication as the life blood of organisation, the element that binds organisation and as embalming fluid for organisation (Myers, 2010). As lockdown began due to COVID-19 pandemic, most of the offices and other workplaces were closed down and forced the majority of employees to work from home.

Working from home poses a new challenge to these employees. It has led employees to a new form of organisational communication – other than that of a face-to-face normal. They may experience impromptu meetings, virtual communication interactions, handling conflict virtually, making decision using mediated communication and maintaining social communication in rare surroundings (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015). Although communicate remotely provide flexibility and autonomy which has been much appreciated by workers, this does not mean it is less a stressful condition.

There are several other challenges of working from home, especially for employees with limited support (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). This unprecedented situation resulted in many employees need to juggle between accomplishing their work task at home, while at the same time attending to all household needs. Worsening the situation when family members have to share communication technology equipment such as computer, tablets, printer, Internet and even desk for working and studying.

Previous study also found, working from home causes employees to experienced tele-pressure as they may deal with large synchronous and asynchronous amount of messages (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). As media richness theory observed, workers switch media when the matter discussed is complicated, create misunderstanding or communicating information requires too much typing. The principle of media richness theory suggests that complicated data is best distributed on rich channels where it is easier to ask

questions, interrupt and give feedback (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Thus how these are being tackled by employees in performing their organisational communication in the enforced remote working?

Past study not only shows how disaster and impactful the pandemic are on the society but organisational behaviour in general is also affected (Klappel et al., 2018). Working from home at all levels has also been attributed to those with greater control in professional positions over how they function. However, in the context of this study, remote work became feasible for most workers and encouraged those who could. With a lack of face-to-face contact and an extensive transition to other forms of communication, this led to changes in the way work was done.

3. Research Questions

To understand the issues presented above, this article raises the following two research questions:

1. What are the challenges of organizational communication in the context of remote work?
2. How can these challenges be addressed so that remote work can be implemented productively?

4. Purpose of the Study

In general, this article aims to understand the phenomenon of organizational communication in the context of new work concepts (remote work). Although work from home is not a new concept, but its practice as a whole and across various sectors of profession is not clear. Accordingly, this study aims to identify the challenges of implementing organisational communication in remote work settings from a wider perspective. In addition, this study will propose recommendations to address the challenges of organisational communication in the context of the future work concept that is remote work or work from home.

5. Research Methods

In order to understand new phenomena, Creswell & Creswell (2018) argues that a qualitative approach is an appropriate method. This is because the methodology offers a research context that can address new things or past studies that are little understood. This research, therefore, uses a qualitative approach by applying methods of in-depth interviews.

Based on a purposeful sampling, a total of fifteen informants have been invited to participate in this event. They are both public and private workers operating from home when the MCO order is enforced by the government in March 2020. Of the fifteen participants, 60 percent or as many as nine were government workers, while the rest were private employees. Eight of them were from management and professional category team. The remaining seven are staff from the support group team. Also, 80% of informants consist of those who are married and another 20% or as many as three individuals with a single status.

All of them have been interviewed online through the WhatsApp video call application. Each session lasted between 15 to 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted within the month of June 2020. Every interview session was recorded. The recording was then transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. Through thematic analysis, a total of five sub-themes for the challenge have been identified.

Meanwhile, a total of four sub-themes have been emerged for recommendations to strengthen work from home organisational communication practices.

6. Findings

As stated earlier, the goal of this study is to explore the challenges and identify recommendations towards productive remote working organisational communication. The first part of this results segment will therefore concentrate on the complexities of remote organisational communication at work and the second part will focus on suggestions for improving it.

6.1. Remote Work Communication Challenges

Based on the analysis of interviews with all informants, a total of five sub-themes were identified to explain the challenges faced by them related to remote work organisational communication. The challenges are information communication technology (ICT) supports, remote work (RW) facilities, digital communication skills, communication climate and digital infrastructure, as shown in Figure 01.

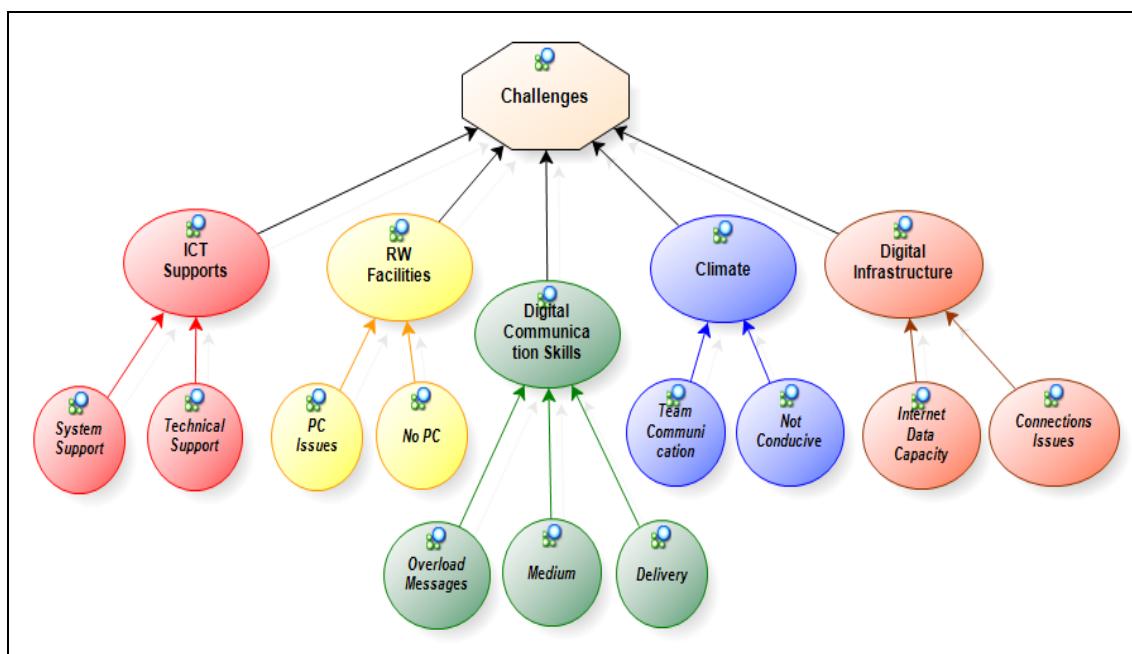


Figure 1. Themes for challenges of remote work organisational communication

The first challenge, ICT supports, refers to the lack or absence of technical assistance services and system support while performing remote work. When informants faced with technical problems in using a specific application or device, they do not have or could not find help. Some have actually claimed that they are unable to perform the job because the access to information systems or work applications is restricted only at the workplace. At home, they cannot access it.

Equipment to perform remote work is the second challenge. This challenge came from almost all the informants. Most of the informant claimed that due to the issue of their computer problems, it was

difficult to conduct remote work. Four informants from the clerical group mentioned that did not have a computer, thus could not do their task.

Digital communication skills become the next challenge. Among the problems they face is messages overload. Many of them describe a lot of information and communication being received repeatedly causing them to be confused and out of focus. The situation gets worst with the use of unsystematic channel, especially by the management. With the lack of readiness and lack of digital communication skills, informants consider this situation less productive or causes task execution to be more complicated. There are also informants who think that during remote work, their supervisors struggle to interact effectively. Managers, on the other hand, claimed their subordinates were not competent in digital communication.

A non-conducive communication climate is the fourth difficulty. This is due to the home environment, which may be a little noisy, and no privacy causing them to feel uncomfortable communicating about work while working from home. Apart from that, many informants also described it as quite difficult to implement group communication virtually due to remote work. Many of them mentioned that the discussion and exchange of ideas in performing tasks is important, but somewhat hindered due to this remote work.

Digital infrastructure emerges as the fifth challenge. It refers to the obstacles encountered in relation to technology networks in realizing virtual communication. Internet network instability and low bandwidth cause communication difficulties. Even communication during remote work also requires high use of Internet data. However, many informants, due to their unaffordability, are not able to subscribe to much data on the Internet. Internet capacity barriers have affected productive remote work.

6.2. Recommendations to improve remote work communication

In an effort to identify remedial measures on the challenges of organizational communication in remote work, the study also raises this question to informants. Four major sub-themes, as shown in Figure 02, have emerged as the results of the thematic analysis.

The main basis for remote work is the communication network. The informants have therefore indicated that the government and its organisations ought to ensure the presence of infrastructure that can support the communication of this remote work. In particular, a reliable Internet network is an essential facility that organisations must provide in order to ensure that remote work can operate. Employers are also advised to provide adequate Internet data facilities to ensure that the communication activities of the organization function smoothly.

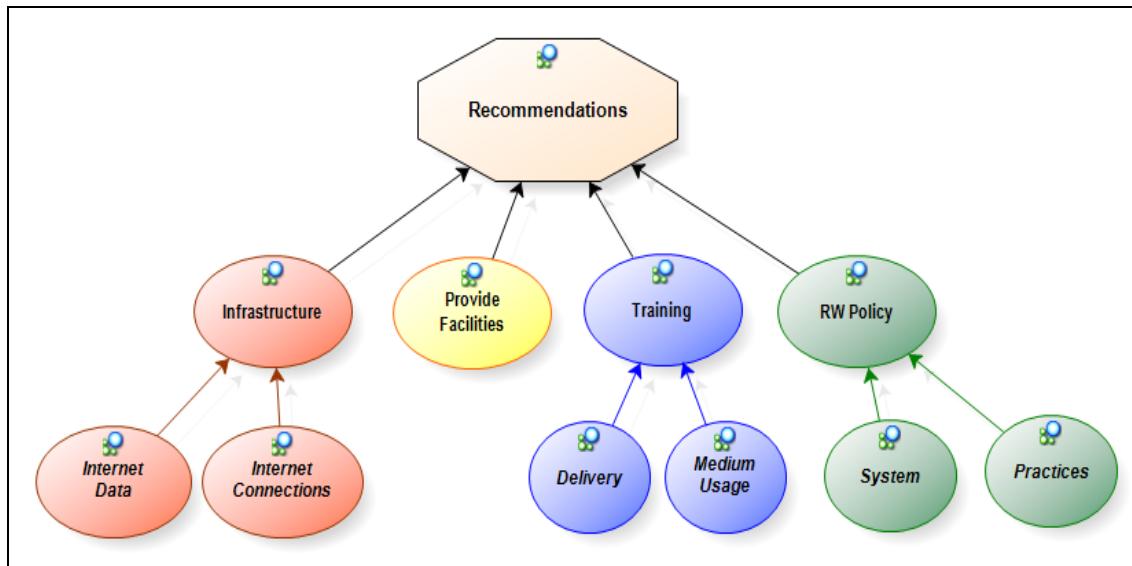


Figure 2. Themes for recommendation of remote work organisational communication

The support of computer devices is something that is very important in addition to the convenience of the Internet. Because the media facilitate most communication practises and organisational work, informants think they should be provided with a computer or tablet that can support work from home. The informants, especially from the support staff group, emphasized this. They said that organisations should supply or lend computer-related equipment to them.

Based on the findings of this research, the study suggests the need for adequate digital communication training and skills to be provided to workers regardless of whether they are from management or support groups. Skills such as the use of communication applications or software, channel selection for virtual communication, how to communicate virtually and virtual communication management are among the skills that can support remote work. Indeed, communication in this era of remote work requires different cultures than conventional organizational communication.

The development of a more comprehensive organisational policy related to organisational communication in remote work setting is another aspect that can be suggested as a result of the analysis of this study. Based on the responses by the informants, two aspects need to be taken into account in relation to the policy. The first is in terms of organisational communication practices in the context of remote work. Organisations need to develop guidelines that are clearer and compatible with the structure for virtual or digital communication. The second is the aspect of organisational data network system that can support the implementation of remote work or work from home. In order to achieve success of remote work communication activities, issues related to information security and more versatile organisational data system may be required.

7. Conclusion

COVID-19 has really posed great implications on working concepts and ideas. While the idea of working from home has already established, it is still not progressive in terms of its implementation. This outbreak, however, has forced the new concept of organisational communication to take over, in the blink

of an eye. This study has shown that infrastructure, skills and environment are among the main challenges in ensuring the effectiveness of organisational communication in the context of remote work. Therefore, numerous ideas for approaching or handling the challenge have been offered. Not only are the recommendations to overcome existing barriers, they are also seen as an important new skill which can be a major communication efficiency for the company (Walden, 2019). The findings of this study have indirectly provide some initial ideas in producing models and theories related to remote work organisation communication.

References

- Anderson, D., & Kelliher, C. (2020). "Enforced remote working and the work-life interface during lockdown", *Gender in Management*, 35(7/8), pp. 677-683. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-07-2020-0224>
- Aziz, A., & Ahmad, M. K. (2016). Exploring work-family balance perception in creative industry. *International Journal of Interactive Digital Media*, 4(1), 51-55.
- Barber, L. K., & Santuzzi, A. M. (2015). Please respond ASAP: Workplace telepressure and employee recovery. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 20, 172-189.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*, 5th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness and Structural Design. *Managing Science*, 32, 554–571.
- Donnelly, N., & Proctor-Thomson, S. B. (2015). Disrupted work: home-based teleworking (HbTW) in the aftermath of a natural disaster. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 30(1), 47–61.
- Klappel, L. M., Pierce, L., & Snyder, J. A. (2018). Perspective -The Deep Historical Roots of Organization and Strategy: Traumatic Shocks, Culture, and Institutions. *Organization Science* 29(5), 702–721. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2017.1173>
- Myers, K. (2010). Millennials in the workplaces: A communication perspective on millennial's organizational relationships and performance. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25(2), 225-238.
- Sull, D., Sull, C., & Bersin, J. (2020). Five ways leaders can support remote work. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 61(4), 1-10.
- Walden, J. (2019). Communicating role expectations in a coworking office. *Journal of Communication Management*, 23(4), 316-329.