

Rebalancing gender inequity and the digital divide: unintended consequences of working from home

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Bolade-Ogunfodun, Yemisi ORCID logo ORCID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8143-6946>, Soga, Lebene ORCID
logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5471-9673> and Nasr,
Rita (2022) Rebalancing gender inequity and the digital divide:
unintended consequences of working from home. In:
Ogunyemi, Kemi and Onaga, Adaora I. (eds.) Responsible
Management of Shifts in Work Modes – Values for a Post
Pandemic Future. Emerald Publishing, pp. 145-161. ISBN
9781802627244 doi: [https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80262-719-
020221012](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80262-719-020221012) Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/103326/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80262-719-020221012>

Publisher: Emerald Publishing

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Rebalancing gender inequity and the digital divide: Unintended consequences of working from home

Yemisi Bolade-Ogunfodun, Lebene Richmond Soga, Rita Nasr

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Working-from-home (WFH) models represent one of several types of flexible work practices gaining ground in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of particular interest is the increase in the use of digital technology platforms for work collaboration and communication. These have been largely well received in terms of their potential to mitigate disruptions to business activity and employee work life in the absence of in-person work contexts. Research indicates that the sales and adoption of many digital platforms have witnessed sharp increase since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. These have contributed to creating seamless organisational collaborations, shared access to electronic data and new organisational processes to mirror previous in-person work arrangements. Many organisational members have had to upskill at rapid rates to catch up with these developments. Despite the benefits to employees, managers, and organisations in terms of facilitating continued remote work, we illuminate the hidden inequities within this work model and highlight the unintended consequences from the standpoint of gender, race and the digital divide. We identify key aspects of WFH that represent underlying factors which create conditions for inequities and illustrate these with a case study. Additionally, we analyse the role of technology as a platform for WFH, noting impacts on employee wellbeing, team dynamics, as well as manager-employee relations. We conclude by raising implications for managers, offering recommendations to rebalance the inequities identified, such as developing an inclusive organisational culture, creating systems to access and evaluate employee feedback as well as developing appropriate response mechanisms that support particularly vulnerable groups.

KEYWORDS:

1. Flexible work

2. Gender inequity
3. Digital divide
4. Teamwork dynamics
5. Manager-employee relations

SUGGESTIONS FOR BOOK INDEX

Digital divide, Working-from -home (WFH), remote work, work-life balance, gender inequity, racial inequity

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic can be considered as one of the major global events of the 21st century. Early accounts of its emergence began towards the end of 2019, with reports of an outbreak in Wuhan, China. What seemed at the time for the West, a distant phenomenon limited to China, was shortly to cause ripple effects around the globe with significant health, social, financial, economic, and political ramifications. As the virus spread, countries began to shut their borders and enforce lockdowns and social distancing whilst tracking the emerging situation. Due to the social distancing requirements, businesses and organisations responded by leveraging technology to facilitate a flexible approach to new work platforms and practices (Deloitte, 2021). These include the widespread adoption of remote working - also known as Working from Home (WFH), flexible working practices (FWP) which include flexible contracts, organisational restructuring of workspaces around hub and spoke models (Laker, 2021).

To cushion the effects of the disruption to business and revenues, many organisations invested in strengthening their capabilities to support employees working from home (Bharathi & Mala, 2016). Research however shows mixed results in terms of effects on organisations and employees. For instance, while employees may enjoy the added flexibility associated with work practices, there are effects on domestic life and quality of health as a result of the tendency to work longer hours (Haley & Miller, 2015), the need to juggle home and work demands (Bharathi & Mala, 2016), challenges with technology and effects on team relationships (Soga et al., 2020).

Similarly, whereas reduced face-to-face working may have lowered organisational expenditure on utilities, employees working from home bear the brunt of increased expenses on their utilities (Chadee et al., 2021). Despite these, what is often missed is the unintended consequence of these changes in the context of a global pandemic and the resultant volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity introduced into personal and organisational spaces.

These challenges have implications for work-life balance, team dynamics and manager-employee relations amongst other outcomes (Larson & DeChurch, 2020). Studies further indicate that females in particular experience significant challenges due to these changes to work patterns, suggesting the problem of gender inequity (Gaiaschi, 2019). These challenges are linked to traditional gender roles and expectations which place

additional demands on the female who is also expected to compete on a 'level' playing field with male counterparts in the workplace (Wiedman, 2020). In other parts of the world, inequity also manifests along racial dimensions and the digital divide (Chen & Wellman, 2004) and creates additional layers of challenges for employees at the intersection of these social categories.

In this chapter, we address some of the unintended consequences of working from home and draw attention to those often taken-for-granted, e.g., the gender and racial inequities, while also highlighting the digital divide. We explore these dynamics using a case study and discuss the findings in relation to challenges for female workers, taking a feminist standpoint. We argue what implications these hold for managerial practice in a post Covid-19 era and offer some practical suggestions to rebalance the inequities that WFH has exposed.

Key issues related to working from home and associated inequities

In this section, we focus on dimensions of inequity which have been exposed by shifts to working from home in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. These are gender inequity, racial inequity, and the effects of the digital technology divide. To enable a more flexible approach to working, some employees have had to change their contract terms to accommodate their personal circumstances. This is particularly common where an employee has family caring responsibilities or health challenges which places them in vulnerable groups. Types of flexible contracts include job-share, flexitime, part-time work etc. In these situations, employees can enjoy the flexibility attached to work times and locations. The immediate benefit for employees however masks some unforeseen outcomes which make working from home more challenging. We describe these as unintended consequences of new working patterns and discuss these in the context of gender and racial inequities, as well as the digital divide.

Working from home as flexible working practice

Flexible working as a concept covers a range of practices which offer flexibility to employees around the type of contract, hours of work or place of work (Cooper & Baird, 2015). In this light, working from home is a dimension of flexible working which allows the employee to work from outside the traditional office location. Given the need to connect multiple employees across different geographical areas or time zones, it is easy to see why flexible working is highly dependent on technology and what it affords. Despite its benefits in

terms of communication and connectivity, research shows that flexible working practices, particularly working from home, has been associated with downsides (Chadee et al., 2021). A concern in the literature relates to the leadership of widely dispersed teams, commitment, and well-being of employees in virtual teams (Suh & Lee, 2017). Working from home, particularly for jobs which can be performed independently carries a risk of social isolation or exclusion (Soga et al., 2020) and could lead to longer working hours (Haley & Miller, 2015).

Technology-related problems such as poor connectivity and infrastructure, software errors, device problems, data security and employee privacy concerns contribute to challenges faced when working remotely which may impact on employee productivity (Chadee et al., 2021). There are also challenges associated with working from home for employees with caring obligations to children or other dependent adults. Bharathi and Mala (2016) note the potential for disruptions when employees are faced with competing demands for their attention. The Covid-19 pandemic is significant in that it brought into mainstream practice, what had previously been a peripheral or optional pattern of work.

Issues around gender inequity

Remote working implicitly carries with it additional demands on workers (Wiedman, 2020). When considered alongside responsibilities for school-age children also studying remotely, women, in particular, are faced with additional pressure which can lead to poor work-life balance as they juggle work and domestic demands and manage the conflicts that may arise from these (Como et al., 2020). Gender studies have often highlighted issues around the nature of the impact of/on gender within organisational contexts. Impacts on gender have typically ranged from underrepresentation (Kisaka et al, 2019), to gender pay gaps (Wiedman, 2020), emotional demands, job security and effects on job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2020). These have emerged because of the unequal impact of workplace policies and practices on women and the need to rebalance inequities caused.

Research on gender inequity has gained attention in both academic and practitioner spaces with growing calls for creating workplaces which provide adequate support to female employees, in terms of career development and opportunities. There are studies which focus on the impacts of gender and in particular the value women bring to organisational contexts, although there have been mixed results in terms of the complex relationship between gender, performance, and other organisational variables (Fairlie & Robb, 2009; Cloninger et al., 2015; Farhat & Mijid, 2018). Other research suggests positive impacts from having a

more gender-diverse organisational board in the sense that there is improvement in corporate performance because of gender diversity (Dang et al., 2018). These empirical studies have influenced policy responses resulting in set targets for increasing female representation in organisations. Despite these institutional level frameworks, the evidence suggests that there is far to go when it comes to female representation or closing the pay gaps and many organisations are yet to meet these targets (Wisniewska et al., 2020).

Gender issues are often underpinned by relations of power (Stojmenovska, 2019), discriminatory social attitudes (Janssen et al., 2016) and stereotypes or perceptions which determine how a person is seen in relation to the world (Wiedman, 2020), all of which impact on what benefits or opportunities they are able to access. Studies show that indeed there are disparities in the lived experiences of employees from a gender perspective (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019). These disparities are significant enough to impact on the wellbeing, career, and advancement of particular groups. Whilst we recognise the post-modern conversations around gender identification, for the female employee, the key underlying factor characterising those who become vulnerable to challenges when working from home because of the pandemic is the issue of caring responsibilities (Michielsens et al., 2013). Different options for flexible working bring about different dynamics for working women who are parents or have responsibility for older dependents. These dynamics involve issues regarding accounting for unpaid work (McCarthy, 2018), which confirms the additional demands placed on women that go largely unrecognised and unrewarded. These domestic labour contributions which potentially form part of the “underground” economy and contribute to the national GDP (Dong & An, 2015) have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Racial dimension of inequity

The phenomenon of racial inequity and its discourse is often more prevalent in western contexts, where the society has increasingly become diversified in terms of racial backgrounds, and more Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups immigrate and settle outside their home communities. While gender inequity was made more visible by the pandemic, studies also show a disproportionate racial impact on employees because of the pandemic in such ‘host’ contexts. For instance, published reports of fatalities across the world indicate the vulnerability of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups as a single demographic cluster, relative to others (Mude et al., 2021). These statistics draw greater attention to multiple dimensions of the challenges typically faced by this group, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. These include racial pay gaps, lack of access to

finance, housing, public infrastructure, adequate healthcare, education, career support and opportunities (The Lammy Review, 2017). Research indicates that ingrained racial attitudes contribute to perpetuating institutional barriers for BAME employees within workplaces through policies and practices that are blind or unresponsive to challenges faced by these groups (Livingston, 2020). As a result of the damaging effects of racial inequity and impacts at individual, team and organisational levels, many organisations have begun to develop measures to tackle the problem.

Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic along with the radical responses of organisations such as redundancies and lay-offs, further exposed the vulnerabilities of minority racial groups. In addition to the loss of employee lives, jobs or livelihoods, such groups face challenges with working from home. Significant pay gaps suggest that without additional support from employers, these employees would have to take on the burden of paying for infrastructure to make home working possible. For employees at the intersection of these categories, for example, black, female workers, they are open to having a qualitatively different experience of work (Crenshaw, 1991). Apart from being at a disadvantaged position compared to their male colleagues because of institutional structures, traditional (ethnic) role expectations regarding domestic responsibilities make additional demands on them in the context of a pandemic (Burns, 2021). Studies confirm the negative health effects of flexible working (Haley & Miller, 2015) but for women from minority groups, we argue that these are exacerbated due to the structural inequities.

The digital divide and its impact on work(ers) during the pandemic

The idea of the digital divide for a long time has been seen as an issue of the global North and the global South and we do not dispute this view. A satellite image of the world map sometimes presents the technologically advanced countries as well lit (indicating high Internet access and other technological progress) and the others as dark, implicitly telling the story of the digital divide (Fox, n.d.). Although it has traditionally been understood to represent the physical access to technological tools like the computer and its other connectivities, the digital divide is now largely conceptualised to include the broad array of resources and factors that allow people to use technology (Warschauer, 2004). This has implications for remote/flexible working practices if we consider that it is not only about access to physical computers and the Internet, which are in themselves necessary, but also the availability of space, know-how, time, flexibility, and other factors needed to work from home effectively. We therefore argue that the digital divide goes beyond the narrow

connotations of it being an issue separating the Global North and Global South. Rather, the digital divide can occur within organisations wherever they are and working from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified that.

For employees working in teams, WFH often assumes equal connectivity and technological access. However, this assumption is untenable since the digital divide is as much an individual issue as it is an organisational one. Larson and DeChurch (2020) outline four perspectives with reference to digital technologies in teams: 1) Technology as team context, where the technology is what creates the conditions that affect teamwork; 2) Technology as sociomaterial team practices, where teamwork and technology are entangled in practice being mutually dependent on one another; 3) Technology as team creation medium, where technology is the enabler that actually determines the new forms of organising among and/or within teams; 4) Technology as teammate, where technology is an active team player within the team. Accordingly, the lack of access to technology for an individual team member disadvantages him/her in a few ways: 1) they are excluded from the context of work to be done; 2) individuals are left to find other resources to get work done; 3) team members become isolated as they lack access to the medium of team creation; and 4) individuals miss out on other team activities that involve technology as a participant. Soga, Vogel, et al. (2020) argue that these unintended consequences due to the digital divide are outcomes of the “technologised” nature of the relationships that teams now work in. In other words, technology is now so intricately woven into the fabric of team relationships in organisations that any individual who happens to be on the disadvantaged side of the digital divide is negatively affected. Our review of the gender, racial and technological inequities inherent in working from home in the context of the pandemic reveals multifaceted dimensions which impact the experience and productivity of workers. We discuss these subsequently and highlight the practical implications for individual employees, teams, and managers.

Changes in team dynamics:

Remote team working among employees is one area that presents practical challenges due to the pandemic. Although the notion of virtual teams has long existed before the pandemic (see Cohen & Gibson, 2003), the idea of WFH due to the pandemic has made virtual work a given and some organisations like Deloitte are beginning to adopt this as a permanent working model (Deloitte, 2021). For successful teamwork, organisations often deploy technologies to enhance daily interaction within teams at lower costs (Bughin et al.,

2009). The implementation of these technologies means that both team members and their leaders are now able to form new working dynamics that are not limited by geographic and time boundaries or limitations. In a practical sense, the physical space for team activity has now been displaced by a virtual space in which the dynamics of teamwork differ from face-to-face situations (Castells, 2010). For example, the number of people one can interact with in the virtual space is infinite whereas there is only so much a physical room can hold for team activity. This implies that the definition of what constitutes an ideal team size - traditionally considered as between four to six people (Belbin, 2012) - no longer holds in the virtual space.

Additionally, the varying pressures that individuals face at home as they work remotely (example as expressed above in terms of gender roles) sometimes blur the boundary between work and non-work, resulting in longer hours of work by some team members compared with others (Fosslie & West-Duffy, 2021). This imbalance, as we have indicated in other aspects in this chapter, is often unrecognised and goes unrewarded. In practice, teams that were not before working virtually now face challenges relating to inclusion and participation in the virtual space as unintended consequences of WFH due to the pandemic (Soga, Vogel, et. al., 2020). These challenges are particularly amplified with the digital divide where some individuals do not have the resources, or the physical technological tools needed to engage in these virtual teams. For example, employees may be given some work resources equally like a laptop. However, if they are unable to pay for suitable connectivity bandwidth at home, their team productivity is hampered. A staff on a higher salary scale may be able to afford better infrastructure whereas another on a lower salary is unable to support his/her working practices to the same extent, thus deepening the inequities as a result of WFH due to the pandemic. Employees are likely to engage in two types of censorship when they are on the other side of the digital divide and lack the capacity to participate in a way that gives them social capital. These are self-censorship and information censorship. Self-censorship is where an employee withholds personal/contextual data on the self, due to technical hurdles and difficulties in resolving them (i.e., lack of capacity to provide sufficient Internet connectivity). Employees may rather choose self-censorship, particularly if the data is about the milieu of limiting factors surrounding the task that they need to do. Information censorship rests on the assumption that the presence of technology is supposed to enhance information flow. However, this is not necessarily so, as individuals can choose to withhold task-related information because of a lack of access to participate in virtual team collaboration and thus hamper information flow.

Changes in manager-employee relations:

The inequities discussed so far also pose practical implications for manager-employee relations. In leadership research, the manager-employee relationship has been mostly studied as leader-follower relations (Ford & Harding, 2018) or as dyadic relations involving a leader and another (set of) individual(s) (Kim et al., 2020). These studies have often positioned the employee as the 'recipient' of leadership action with the 'leader' in a privileged position. In the context of the arguments raised so far in this chapter, the contextual changes that have occurred because of WFH due to the pandemic are agnostic to what position an individual holds in the manager-employee relationship including what gender or race they (self-)identify with. However, the practical ramifications of the levelling of what was beforehand a hierarchical relationship is not without its challenges. First, managers as well as employees have been equally affected by the work/non-work blurring of boundaries due to WFH as alluded to earlier in this chapter; this is irrespective of the hierarchical nature of the relationship.

The commonality of the pandemic's impact calls for empathetic approaches to leadership that is human-centric, beyond the task-focused nature of measuring KPIs and other employee performance indicators. This change in leadership style coupled with a shift from hierarchical to relational approaches has long been highlighted by research as necessary ingredients for contemporary leadership practice (see Coine & Babbitt, 2014), and it has now become imminent due to the pandemic. In other words, the manager-employee relationship is now one in which Napoleons are not different in kind to commoners (Law, 1992). In practical ways, trust is needed to sustain the relationship (Gao et al., 2011). We believe this change is a positive unintended consequence as it implicitly corrects the hierarchical imbalances and inequities in organisations, or at least attempts to do so. To ground our theorising around inequities and the digital divide in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we present a case study which we analyse in relation to the key concepts, with practical implications.

A Case Study of Olive, a Project Manager

Olive is a 45-year-old African woman who works as a health professional. She is a married mother of three (aged between 6 and 17). They live in a densely populated immigrant community in Southeast London. Crime rate in her neighbourhood is high and permanent jobs are difficult to come by, particularly in her industry. Olive has been on short-

term contracts with a large government organisation and with intermittent income supply, she has had to juggle other side hustles to make ends meet as her husband is currently unemployed. In addition to being the breadwinner for the family, Olive is positioned in a home with cultural expectations and fulfils her traditional role as the mother, cook, cleaner and homemaker, all the while fighting hard to grow her career as an educated migrant black woman in modern Britain. With the COVID-19 pandemic, Olive began to work from home, having received a company laptop and work phone. It is however a struggle to keep up with household bills, including maintaining internet connectivity. This brought unbearable challenges to Olive as WFH impacted on her ability to focus on her job, and continuous distractions came from attending to daily family caring needs, the noise from family members answering phone calls, exercising, watching TV, participating in an online class or external distractions from the neighbourhood. With no suitable 'office space' at home and her children home-schooling, Olive faces highly stressful conditions daily and struggles to be productive working from home. She has a good relationship with her team manager and ensures that she delivers on her projects but at great cost to her wellbeing and mental health; this includes staying up to send late night emails and resultant poor sleep affecting her alertness at morning team meetings. Olive deals with this tension by living each moment and keeping a straight face at work. Although she is grateful for her job, she feels uncomfortable talking about the additional stress due to working from home.

Analysing the case of Olive

Analysing Olive's experiences unveils a few issues regarding the inequalities discussed in this chapter. We can observe some conditions which predispose Olive to a more acute experience of working from home due to the pandemic. First, there are domestic conditions such as inadequate space, an unemployed spouse, caring responsibilities and assumed cultural expectations around gender roles which for her as a Black woman reinforce the domestic obligations. Secondly, there are social conditions which frame her experience in the community. These include being a black female professional struggling to move up the career ladder, living in a predominantly black neighbourhood with problems of security and unemployment and associated racial stereotypes often found in mixed communities (Minhas & Walsh, 2021). Thirdly, we observe financial conditions which limit her capacity to translate her work infrastructure into her domestic context. Having short term work contracts over a protracted period results in her struggles to pay the bills as sole income earner for the family. The pressure on the family disposable income therefore makes it difficult to afford creating a better 'office space' and purchasing supporting equipment.

Fourthly, the conditions of her work suggest that she has a good relationship with her team lead. However, achieving work tasks comes at the expense of her health because of working long hours and poor sleep patterns. We highlight key themes emerging from this case and discuss these subsequently considering working from home and dynamics for gender inequity and the digital divide:

Theme 1: Gender inequity in Work-life balance

Olive's unique situation as a project manager, a wife, and a mother of three poses challenges for work-life balance from a gender standpoint. As argued earlier, working from home blurs the boundaries between domestic responsibilities and professional commitments. But this is particularly so for Olive whose family also maintains the traditional gendered roles of the wife as the homemaker. She alludes to feeling stagnated in her career because of various family struggles and WFH complexities she navigates. Thornton (2016) shows a negative impact on women's career progression due to WFH models including interference of professional life by other life or family responsibilities. These inequities tend to appear in ways that render the woman as a 'poor worker' who is unproductive in her job, causing anxiety and other stresses for professional women (O'Connor & Cech, 2018). In Olive's case, she puts in extra effort, working late nights and sacrificing sleep to do her job. From a feminist standpoint (Franks, 2002) Olive's experience represents ascribed positionality which inadvertently engenders marginalisation in the context. Feminist theories frown upon this and call for a levelling of the playing field to rebalance the hierarchies which events such as the endemic precipitate in society, where the woman's positionality is embedded within inequalities in power relations (Maher & Tetreault, 1993).

Theme 2: The digital divide

As argued in this chapter, the major concerns of the digital divide are associated with accessing technological tools and communication networks but also the resources needed to access these technologies. For individuals working from home, resources needed to access the relevant technologies for their work can be challenging, leading to stress and other work pressures (Suh & Lee, 2017). In Olive's case, she has a company laptop but struggles to pay the accompanying Internet charges that would allow her to do her job. Whereas her company believes access to technology is met, the reality is quite different for Olive. The financial challenges and the resultant stress can potentially cause conflicts, which

in turn impacts wellbeing and ultimately work (Como et al., 2020). This can also affect employees' job satisfaction and lead to increasing withdrawal behaviours. Additionally, while Olive's struggles to remain connected to her colleagues for work is hidden from managerial view, the expectations of project delivery remain unchanged. This inequity means she continues to work under stress with detrimental health impacts (Como et al., 2020). If she is cut off due to non-payment of bills, she risks becoming isolated from team activities and excluded from work, both being negative unintended consequences (Soga, Vogel, et. al., 2020). The digital divide in Olive's case also carries spatial dimensions; she does not have the 'office space' in her home to work effectively, with her children in home-schooling and other domestic factors competing for 'workspace'. This spatial dimension is often not considered as contributing to the digital divide; the focus has often been on access to technology and not what it takes to use the technology effectively for its intended purpose, which Olive's situation has shown. We argue that taking the feminist standpoint allows us to uncover and address issues that the digital divide engenders (Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Franks, 2002). In this case, it looks beyond discussions of technological access in the global North-South dichotomy and focuses on the person experiencing the digital divide. In the case of Olive, this is shown in the limitations within the home which stifle the use of technology for her work.

Implications for managerial practice

The inequities argued in this chapter offer significant implications for managers and their organisations. Managers need to be aware that WFH models carry the potential to hamper employee visibility and by consequence social interaction, which in turn negatively impacts on team cohesion and trust (Soga, Bolade-Ogunfodun, et. al., 2022). This is further deepened by the digital divide as argued earlier.

Managers must recognise the nuances involved in understanding the digital divide and question their assumptions around the capabilities of employees who are working from home. Understanding the inequities embedded in access to supporting technological infrastructure for home working should prompt responses which seek to identify gaps and provide adequate support for productivity. A failure to address these hidden challenges for employees creates conditions where employees are vulnerable to isolation, perceived lack of visibility at work and the associated loss of opportunities. A lack of visibility particularly exposes the employee to the risk of surveillance, unfair monitoring, and closer control to ascertain work being done, as against other colleagues who are perceived as visible.

With an understanding of employee behaviour under conditions of home working such as self-censorship and information censorship (Soga, Bolade-Ogunfodun & Laker, 2021), as well as limitations relating to technology, managers need to create organisational conditions which foster values such as trust and equity and reflect a prioritisation of equitable practices. These contribute to not only developing a culture which communicates that employees are indeed the organisation's prized assets, but also facilitates productivity despite the limitations of the pandemic.

One area of importance that has often eluded managerial practice is the spatial implications that the arguments raised in this chapter have raised. The COVID-19 pandemic has made prominent the spatial dispersion of team members as social distancing measures are mandated to help curtail the spread of the disease. Managers turn to technological platforms in an attempt to bridge the spatial gap and allow employees to continue work but these also come with their own unintended consequences exacerbated by the digital divide (Soga, Vogel, et. al., 2020) including challenges with connectivity (Chadee et al., 2021). However, the managerial attention on the spatial distribution of teams masks the spatial needs of individual team members as they work from home.

Recommendations

Recognising the inequity in the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on different genders necessitates an inclusive organizational orientation. To gauge the impact of the pandemic, internal surveys, focus groups, and interviews can be conducted to tease out the peculiar challenges for employees, particularly for those with caring responsibilities. Similarly, in geographical locations where workers are from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, the internal data provides a way to uncover challenges faced because of the pandemic. Based on the analysis of this data, solutions can be developed which are meaningful for employees and support their productivity. For example, practices around scheduling meeting times, design of work targets, adjustments in work expectations and timeframes for delivery, and support for various forms of flexible working will cushion the negative effects of maintaining productivity in a pandemic era.

Given our arguments for the existence of digital divides within organisations, business leaders can be proactive in providing conducive work infrastructure for employees, recognising that there are additional burdens placed on workers when it comes to sustaining productive work environments. It is beneficial to review policies around workstation safety,

tax, or income compensations for additional spend on technology to support remote working and sustain the productive capacity of organisations. In summary, the following are key recommendations for rebalancing inequities due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Culture:** Develop an inclusive organisational culture which is empathetic and open to genuine learning about employee needs. Such culture addresses the problems of gender or racial inequity and helps to create conditions that foster trust in the organisation by ensuring fairness in how people are treated as well as remunerated.
- **Research:** Develop a system for accessing data to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on employees through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and informal conversations. This may include a regular check-in with employees regarding emergent challenges they face as they work from home such as workspace limitations, which managers can then factor into the design of tasks, responsibilities, and delivery times.
- **Sensitivity:** Pay particular attention to employee categories who are at risk of being invisible or marginalised and develop appropriate response mechanisms that support employees in their jobs. This helps to address the problem of exclusion which particular groups or demographics might be experiencing.
- **Digital support:** Recognise that not everyone in your organisation is well equipped to engage with the digital technologies needed for WFH. This may be due to spatial or technological limitations at home. Both formal and informal support systems that specifically focus on addressing digital poverty and increasing technological knowhow could be put in place to ensure employees are not inadvertently left out.
- **Leadership:** Make a conscious effort to address the leadership climate in your organisation. Specific steps to do this include a review of your organisational structure. A strongly hierarchical structure would create conditions for distant leadership, particularly in socially-distanced forms of work. Developing relational approaches to leadership could be encouraged through teamwork across (instead of within) functions and employees could be empowered through effective delegation.

Practical questions for managers to consider:

1. In your organisation, what are the major challenges women face while working from home?
2. Does the pandemic and remote working make it easier for women to simultaneously work and earn an income in physical proximity to family?
3. Does the use of technology in new ways of working put women at any disadvantaged position compared to their male counterparts?

4. As an organisation, what support do you offer to immigrant female employees from minority ethnic communities?

Conclusion

This chapter examines the impact of the global pandemic on business organisations and illuminates inequities which are heightened due to the shift to flexible working practices, particularly working from home. Largely positive attitudes to the benefits of technology-enabled work practices often mask unintended consequences for different groups within the organisation. We highlight gender, racial and infrastructural inequities which are involved and discuss the practical implications for managers in a global VUCA environment. These include actions to develop inclusive cultures, uncover systemic inequities and proffer meaningful solutions to vulnerable groups. Whereas it would be valuable to further research the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, to gain understanding of the long-term employee productivity and health, business sustainability and policy, we argue that the dynamics for gender equity and the digital divide must not be taken for granted.

References:

- Belbin, R.M. (2012) *Management Teams*. 2nd ed. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis
- Bharathi, S. V., & Mala, E. P. (2016). A Study on the Determinants of Work–Life Balance of Women Employees in Information Technology Companies in India. *Global Business Review*, 17(3), 665–683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150916630847>
- Bughin, J., Chui, M., & Miller, A. (2009). How companies are benefiting from Web 2.0: McKinsey global survey results. McKinsey & Company. http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/business_technology/how_companies_are_benefiting_from_web_20_mckinsey_global_survey_results
- Burns, U. (2021). “I’m Here Because I’m As Good As You”. *Harvard Business Review*, 99(4), 132–136.
- Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society: The information age: Economy, society, and culture* (Vol. 1, 2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Chadee, D., Ren, S., & Tang, G. (2021). Is digital technology the magic bullet for performing work at home? Lessons learned for post COVID-19 recovery in hospitality management. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 92, 102718. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102718>
- Chen, W., & Wellman, B. (2004), *The Global Digital Divide – Within and between Countries, IT and Society*, 1(7), pp. 18-25.
- Cloninger, P. A., Selvarajan, T. T. (Rajan), Singh, B., & Huang, S. (Charlie). (2015). The mediating influence of work–family conflict and the moderating influence of gender on employee outcomes. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(18), 2269–2287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2015.1004101>
- Cohen, S. G., & Gibson, C. B. (Eds.). (2003). *Virtual teams that work: Creating conditions for effective virtual teams*. Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Coine, T., & Babbitt, M. (2014). *A world gone social: How companies must adapt to survive*. AMACOM.
- Como, R., Hambley, L., & Domene, J. (2020). An Exploration of Work-Life Wellness and Remote Work During and Beyond COVID-19. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 20(1), 46–56.
- Cooper, R., & Baird, M. (2015). Bringing the “right to request” flexible working arrangements to life: From policies to practices. *Employee Relations*, 37(5), 568–581. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-07-2014-0085>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dang A, R., Houanti, L., Ammari, A., & Lê, N. T. (2018). Is there a “business case” for board gender diversity within French listed SMEs. *Applied Economics Letters*, 25(14), 980–983. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2017.1390308>

- Deloitte (2021). Press Releases: Deloitte gives its 20,000 people the choice of when and where they work. <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/press-releases/articles/deloitte-gives-its-20000-people-the-choice-of-when-and-where-they-work.html>
- Dong, X., & An, X. (2015). Gender Patterns and Value of Unpaid Care Work: Findings From China's First Large-Scale Time Use Survey. *Review of Income & Wealth*, 61(3), 540–560. <https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12119>
- Fairlie, R. W., & Robb, A. M. (2009). Gender differences in business performance: evidence from the Characteristics of Business Owners survey. *Small Business Economics*, 33(4), 375–395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-009-9207-5>
- Farhat, J., & Mijid, N. (2018). Do women lag behind men? A matched-sample analysis of the dynamics of gender gaps. *Journal of Economics & Finance*, 42(4), 682–709. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12197-017-9416-8><https://doi.org/10.1080/08985629800000007>
- Ford, J., & Harding, N. (2018). Followers in leadership theory: Fiction, fantasy and illusion. *Leadership*, 14(1), 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015621372>
- Fosslien, L., & West-Duffy, M. (2021). How to prevent the return to offices from being an emotional roller coaster. MIT Sloan Management Review. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-prevent-the-return-to-offices-from-being-an-emotional-roller-coaster/>
- Fox, P., (n.d.). The global digital divide. Khan Academy, Available at <https://www.khanacademy.org/computing/computers-and-internet/xcae6f4a7ff015e7d:the-internet/xcae6f4a7ff015e7d:the-digital-divide/a/the-global-digital-divide> (accessed 18/08/2021)
- Franks, M. (2002). Feminisms and Cross-ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality – Developing Cross-ideological Feminist Research. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 3(2), 38.
- Fuller, S., & Hirsh, C. E. (2019). “Family-Friendly” Jobs and Motherhood Pay Penalties: The Impact of Flexible Work Arrangements Across the Educational Spectrum. *Work and Occupations*, 46(1), 3–44. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888418771116>
- Gao, L., Janssen, O., & Shi, K. (2011). Leader trust and employee voice: The moderating role of empowering leader behaviors. *Leadership Quarterly*, 22(4), 787–798. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.05.015>
- Haley, M. R., & Miller, L. A. (2015). Correlates of flexible working arrangements, stress, and sleep difficulties in the US workforce: Does the flexibility of the flexibility matter? *Empirical Economics*, 48(4), 1395–1418. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00181-014-0836-4>
- Janssen S, Tuor Sartore S, Backes-Gellner U. Discriminatory Social Attitudes and Varying Gender Pay Gaps within Firms. *ILR Review*. 2016;69(1):253-279. doi:10.1177/0019793915601633
- Kim, J., Yammarino, F. J., Dionne, S. D., Eckardt, R., Cheong, M., Tsai, C.-Y., Guo, J., & Park, J. W. (2020). State-of-the-science review of leader-follower dyads research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 31(1), 101306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101306>

- Kisaka, L. G., Jansen, E. P. W. A., & Hofman, A. W. H. (2019). Workforce diversity in Kenyan public universities: an analysis of workforce representativeness and heterogeneity by employee gender and ethnic group. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*, 41(1), 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2018.1545523>
- Laker, B. (2021). Why Companies Should Adopt a Hub-and-Spoke Work Model Post-Pandemic. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-companies-should-adopt-a-hub-and-spoke-work-model-post-pandemic/>
- Larson, L., & DeChurch, L. A. (2020). Leading teams in the digital age: Four perspectives on technology and what they mean for leading teams. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 31(1), 101377. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101377>
- Law, J. (1992). Notes on the theory of the actor-network: Ordering, strategy, and heterogeneity. *Systems Practice*, 5(4), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01059830>
- Lee, H.-W., Robertson, P. J., & Kim, K. (2020). Determinants of Job Satisfaction Among U.S. Federal Employees: An Investigation of Racial and Gender Differences. *Public Personnel Management*, 49(3), 336–366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091026019869371>
- Livingston, R. (2020) How to Promote Racial Equity in the Workplace. *Harvard Business Review* <https://hbr.org/2020/09/how-to-promote-racial-equity-in-the-workplace>
- Maher, F. A., & Tetreault, M. K. (1993). Frames of Positionality: Constructing Meaningful Dialogues about Gender and Race. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 66(3), 118–126. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3317515>
- McCarthy, L. (2018). “There is no time for rest”: Gendered CSR, sustainable development and the unpaid care work governance gap. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 27(4), 337–349. <https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12190>
- Michielsens, E., Bingham, C., & Clarke, L. (2013). Managing diversity through flexible work arrangements: Management perspectives. *Employee Relations*, 36(1), 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-06-2012-0048>
- Minhas, R., & Walsh, D. (2021). The role of prejudicial stereotypes in the formation of suspicion: An examination of operational procedures in stop and search practices. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14613557211016499>
- Mude, W., Oguoma, V. M., Nyanhanda, T., Mwanri, L., & Njue, C. (2021). Racial disparities in COVID-19 pandemic cases, hospitalisations, and deaths: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Global Health*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.11.05015>
- O’Connor, L. T., & Cech, E. A. (2018). Not Just a Mothers’ Problem: The Consequences of Perceived Workplace Flexibility Bias for All Workers. *Sociological Perspectives*, 61(5), 808–829. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121418768235>
- Roberts, L. M., McCluney, C. L., Thomas, E. L. and Kim, M. (2020) How US companies can support employees of colour through the pandemic. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/05/how-u-s-companies-can-support-employees-of-color-through-the-pandemic>

- Sivashanker, K., Duong, T., Ford, S., Clark C., and Eappen, S. (2020) A data driven approach to addressing healthcare disparities in health care outcomes. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/07/a-data-driven-approach-to-addressing-racial-disparities-in-health-care-outcomes>
- Soga, L. R., Vogel, B., Graça, A. M., & Osei-Frimpong, K. (2020). Web 2.0-enabled team relationships: An actor-network perspective. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2020.1847183>
- Soga, L., Bolade-Ogunfodun, Y., & Laker, B. (2021). Design Your Work Environment to Manage Unintended Tech Consequences. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/design-your-work-environment-to-manage-unintended-tech-consequences/>
- Soga, L. R., Bolade-Ogunfodun, Y., Mariani, M., Nasr, R., & Laker, B. (2022). Unmasking the other face of flexible working practices: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Business Research*, 142, 648–662. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.01.024>
- Suh, A., & Lee, J. (2017). Understanding teleworkers' technostress and its influence on job satisfaction. *Internet Research*, 27(1), 140–159. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IntR-06-2015-0181>
- The Lammy Review (2017). An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system. Accessed on 3rd September, 2021 Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lammy-review-final-report>
- Thornton, M. (2016). Work/life or work/work? Corporate legal practice in the twenty-first century. *International Journal of the Legal Profession*, 23(1), 13–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09695958.2015.1093939>
- Warschauer, M. (2004). *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. MIT Press.
- Wiedman, C. (2020). Rewarding Collaborative Research: Role Congruity Bias and the Gender Pay Gap in Academe. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 167(4), 793–807. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04165-0>
- Wisniewska, A., Ehrenberg-Shannon, B., & Gordon, S. (2020). Gender pay gap: How women are short-changed in the UK. *Financial Times*. <https://iq.ft.com/gender-pay-gap-UK/>