

REMOTE WORKING ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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ABSTRACT

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As a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, employees have begun working remotely from home, which has resulted in new challenges in the work environment. The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges of the remote work environment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine the level of these challenges according to the worker's gender and job. This study was conducted on 11 Jordanian IT companies at the end of 2020. The intentional sample was used, 125 valid questionnaires were used in the analysis. The results show that the respondents' perceptions of the challenges of the remote work environment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic were high. There are also statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) for the level of challenges in the remote working environment according to gender (male/female) in favor of females and according to job level (supervisory or non-supervisory) in favor of non-supervisory jobs. To increase organisational performance, all parties—employees, families, and management—must cooperate to overcome the challenges of the remote work environment.

Contribution/ Originality: The study enriches the remote work literature and offers suggestions for overcoming the challenges of remote work.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of remote work has recently emerged, which means that employees perform their job duties outside the workplace by using various means of communication and information technology (Viktorovich et al., 2020). Many businesses have adopted remote work in some sectors with the aim of reducing costs and as a flexible way of performing work, thus saving time and effort. This change is considered good for employee morale but not necessarily for their productivity (Manley, 2002).

In 2019 and the beginning of 2020, the practice of working remotely increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the free movement of individuals was restricted, most activities stopped, and study was disrupted in most parts of the world; therefore, organisations tended to assign their employees to work remotely using IT. Homes have turned into places of work in which students continue their studies, professors give their lectures, employees conduct their work, and managers participate in conferences and meetings using various computer applications. Those practicing their work remotely and from home face many challenges in the work environment as the home, previously the place for relaxation and comfort, becomes the workplace. Matters become especially complicated when there are no clear boundaries between the working life and the home life of the female employee and when there are multiple remote workers in the same house. This new work environment requires employees to adapt to new environmental conditions and to experience a merger between work and personal life. The work

environment consists of two dimensions: physical and behavioral. These dimensions affect motivation, productivity and the performance of employees (Sharma, Dhar, & Tyagi, 2016).

Results of surveys carried out by Gensler Research Institute (2020) on working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that only 12% of American workers want to work from home, and that most of the respondents want to return to the workplace but only with precautionary measures put in place to confront the epidemic. This suggests the existence of challenges in the remote work environment that can affect the efficiency of performance.

Therefore, this study identifies some challenges of the remote work environment (physical and behavioral) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and determines the level of these challenges according to the respondent's gender (male, female) and job (supervisory, non-supervisory) from the point of view of a sample of employees in eleven IT companies in Jordan.

The importance of the study stems from that of the topic of remote work and its impact on employee productivity, with which organisations must deal if they want to survive in a rapidly changing environment. This study also examines the importance of the study community in which the telecommunications and information technology sector in Jordan operates and which provides software solutions and technical support to all sectors working remotely. The study confirms that there are sectors that will continue to work remotely even after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, taking advantage of the experience of working remotely. All these factors make studying the remote work environment and its challenges important. The following study hypotheses can be formulated: First, there are no statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) for the level of challenges in the remote work environment according to the gender (male/female) of the respondents in context of the COVID-19 pandemic; Second, there are no statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) for the level of challenges in the remote work environment according to the field of work of the respondent's job (supervisory, non-supervisory) in context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Remote Work

The concept of remote work is not new. Rather, this concept was used by Nilles (1975) and developed with the start of information and communication technology. Remote work meant that employees would perform their job duties from a place other than that specified for work by using information and communication technology. Remote work requires tools such as computers, mobile smart phones, computer applications and the internet (Robbins & Coulter, 2012).

Michael and Smith (2015) stated that working remotely leads to an increase in job satisfaction among workers because of the flexibility that such work provides; for example, some women prefer working remotely so that they can work and care for children at the same time. Others have reported that there is little clear evidence that remote work increases job satisfaction and productivity (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Thirty percent of Russian workers said they wished remote work would still be possible after the pandemic. Telework gives them a flexible schedule, allowing them to spend less money on lunch, commuting or work clothes. They stated that there are also negative effects of working remotely as it became difficult for them to maintain a work-life balance and because of problems in concentration and effectiveness (Elagina, 2020).

Milana (2020) has studied employees of a financial services company in Finland. The results indicated that the employees were very satisfied with working remotely; most of them were willing to continue doing so in the future as well. Respondents mentioned benefits of working remotely such as more efficient work, better possibilities for concentration at work, increased work-life balance and increased motivation to work. However, they also raised some negative issues such as a deteriorating work environment and decreased social interaction. Hartig, Kylin, and Johansson (2007) reached a similar conclusion about the negative effects of remote work such as the interference

between work and the employee's home life. [Bubishate \(2020\)](#) also dealt with the implementation of remote work in the context of COVID-19, indicating that remote work requires a qualitative shift in the way institutions facilitate communications with employees to accomplish work; therefore, there is the need to develop work procedures and to expand the application of the principle of remote work by providing technologies, infrastructure and technical assistance in addition to the administrative aspects related to remote work procedures.

[Nassif and Koumouche \(2020\)](#) studied the imperative of working remotely and the shift towards electronic management in 75 Syrian organisations operating in Turkey during COVID-19. They concluded that these organisations possess the necessary ingredients for a shift towards electronic management but need time— up to two years— to shift to work from away, facing weakness in some transformation requirements.

[Al-Yafi and Al-Omari \(2013\)](#) researched the psychological trends of remote work practice among Business students, which indicated that their students found that working remotely helped to increase productivity. Likewise, [Najm \(2018\)](#) examined the ability of university graduates to work remotely, showing a positive relationship between information technology infrastructure, job satisfaction, confidence and productivity.

The researcher [Abu \(2015\)](#) evaluated the experience of companies working remotely in the Gaza Strip, concluding that the level of knowledge of working remotely in the Gaza Strip is weak, the level of trust between the parties in the remote work system is medium, and that the level of the remote experience available in the Gaza Strip is mediocre. Achieving goals through remote work has also had a high degree of influence on the empowerment dimension in the work environment. [Pyöriä \(2011\)](#) concluded that the speed of completion of work in the workplace is superior to that of remote work due to the absence of a culture of remote work among members of Finnish society; however, remote work can be successful if employees know from the beginning what to expect and are ready to deal with any problems and concerns associated with the new work culture.

Among more recent studies is that carried out by [Gensler Research Institute \(2020\)](#) found that only one in eight Americans would like to work from home full-time after the end of the epidemic. Most want to return to work as usual in the office, but more than a quarter of the workforce has not decided yet. It is worth noting that the study found that the quality of the original work environment directly impacts workers' interest in returning, so the more satisfied the employees with the previous work environment, the fewer days they want to work from home. This finding is consistent with the objectives of this study: to identify and overcome the challenges of the remote work environment. Some studies have even gone beyond the psychological and productive effects of remote work to the study of the external effects of remote work. For example, [Pirdavani, Bellemans, Brijs, Kochan, and Wets \(2014\)](#) studied the effect of remote work on reducing the rate of traffic accidents, finding that the remote work policy contributed to reducing crashes by 2.6%, and that following a policy of telework helped to regulate the movement of transport.

2.2. Work Environment

The working environment should be a place where employees desire to work ([Boles, Pelletier, & Lynch, 2004](#)). Others define the work environment as everything that surrounds the company ([Surjosuseno, 2015](#)). Most previous studies have dealt with the impact of the work environment on various aspects of satisfaction. [Asriani and Riyanto \(2020\)](#) reached the conclusion that the work environment, compensation and job satisfaction can all have a negative impact on staff turnover. [Qawasma \(2020\)](#) studied the effect of the quality of the work environment in industrial companies, finding that there is a high positive relationship between the quality of the work environment and work pressure, promotion, career progression, participation in decision-making, occupational safety, job stability, training and wages. [Surjosuseno \(2015\)](#) researched the effects of work environment and work motivation on employee performance. [Sofyan \(2013\)](#) mentioned that companies must create attractive working conditions that can provide the motivation to work. Therefore, it can be said that the work environment affects the performance of the organisation.

Research in the field of remote work environment is still fresh, but in the future, organisations will lean heavily on remote work, especially after COVID-19. The direction of future business organisations will be toward reducing costs, often provided by remote work, leading to more studies about the remote work environment and its challenges as well as ways to overcome and adapt to them. The current study involves all these issues. According to the findings in literature about remote work environment, these questions were formed:

Q1: What is the respondent's level of practice of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Q2: What are the respondent's perceptions of the challenges in the remote work environment in context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Q3: Does the level of challenges in the remote work environment differ according to the respondent's gender in the context of COVID-19 pandemic?

Q4: Does the level of challenges in the remote work environment differ according to the respondent's job (supervisory and non-supervisory) in the context of COVID-19 pandemic?

3. METHODS

The main purposes of this research are to identify the challenges of the remote work environment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to determine the level of these challenges according to the respondent's gender and job.

3.1. Sample and Population

The study population consisted of eleven IT companies in Jordan, listed in the directory of IT companies in 2020. These companies as shown in Table 1.

Table-1. Information Technology Companies.

No	Company Names
1	Ejabi for Reliable Applications
2	Abujaber Investment Group
3	Global For Telecommunication Technology Company
4	AL FIDAA ENGINEERING
5	Oriented Software
6	WingsSoft Information
7	ProgressSoft's
8	TjDeeD
9	REALSOFT
10	Crown IT
11	GCESoft

Keeping in view study objectives, the data were collected from supervisory positions: these are the functions assigned to supervision in IT companies that are searched in Jordan. The positions include top management positions (director, assistant director), middle management positions (department manager, department head) and lower management positions (division head, supervisor).

In addition, data was collected from non-supervisory jobs: the jobs assigned to workers with specialized and specific job tasks including programmers, system analysts, computer engineers, data-entry personnel, maintenance technicians and others. The respondents were selected through the stratified random sampling technique, as this sampling technique deems most appropriate in the study context. From the 140 questionnaires, 125 were returned, of which 15 were dropped because of inadequate or incomplete information. Therefore, the successful response rate was 89 percent.

3.2. Data Collection

The data were collected through survey questionnaires, and measurement items were adopted from past valid studies (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Najm, 2018). All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale where 1 represented 'strongly disagree' and 5 'strongly agree'. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficients. The coefficients are above 0.60, which means that the scales used to measure these variables were consistent and therefore reliable. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first included the personal and job data of the respondents, and the second consisted of the paragraphs that measure the dimensions of the study:

- Paragraphs 1-6 measure the level of use of remote work in context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Paragraphs 7-15 measure the respondent's perception of the challenges of the remote work environment in context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A scale (five Likert) was used with five degrees (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). The values of the arithmetic averages were dealt with to interpret the data. See Table 2.

Table-2. Values of the arithmetic averages.

High	Medium	Low
3.68-5	2.34-3.67	1-2.33

The statistical package software SPSS V: 25 was used to answer the study questions and to test hypotheses.

3.3. Analysis of Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the study are presented in Table 3 below. Most of the respondents were male (68%); only 32% were female. Most respondents were married (73) representing 58%, while those single (52) represented 42%. Most of the respondents were from non-supervisory jobs (107) representing 86%, while supervisory jobs (18) represented 14%.

Table-3. Demographic Characteristics.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Male	85	68%
Female	40	32%
Total	125	100%
single	52	42%
Married	73	58%
Total	125	100%
Supervisory	18	14%
Non-supervisory	107	86%
Total	125	100%

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section answers the study questions and discusses the results.

Q1: What is the respondent's level of practice of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Table 4 shows that the respondents' level of practice of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic was moderate with a total of 3.56, which indicates that there are challenges in the remote work environment that have led to a decrease in the level of their performance of job tasks. The table also shows that the respondents agreed moderately that the time and quality of their work during the pandemic was the same as before the pandemic, which suggests that the quality and time of work were affected negatively by remote work. If we know that these respondents are workers in the IT sector, which provides support to employees in various sectors to practice their work remotely during the pandemic, the depth of the negative effects felt by the pandemic as well as the great

efforts made by this sector become clear, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. These findings are in line with the result of a study by Pyörriä (2011) which showed the great likelihood of success working remotely if employees knew from the outset what to expect and were prepared to deal with it. This result is partly consistent with another study (Abu, 2015) which examines the experience of working remotely in the Gaza Strip, indicating that the level of experience available remotely in the Gaza Strip was moderate.

Table-4. Respondents' Viewpoints about Level of Remote Work Practice during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

No	Para	Mean	SD	Rank	Degree
1	I practiced my work remotely when mobility stopped due to the Corona pandemic.	3.62	0.45	2	Moderate
2	My practice of remote work during the Corona pandemic was at the same level as work before.	3.52	0.62	4	Moderate
3	The work I was doing while working remotely during the Corona pandemic are the same before the pandemic.	3.66	0.245	1	Moderate
4	The time to complete my job tasks while working remotely due to the Corona pandemic is the same time to complete these tasks before the pandemic.	3.54	0.325	3	Moderate
5	I think that the quality of my work while working remotely due to the Corona pandemic is the same as the quality of my work before the pandemic.	3.46	0.145	5	Moderate
Total		3.56	0.358		Moderate

Q2: What are the respondent's perceptions of the challenges in the remote work environment in context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Table-5. Respondents' Perceptions of the Challenges in the Remote Work Environment in Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

No	Para	Mean	SD	Rank	Degree
6	There is no appropriate place in my house to work remotely.	4.178	0.125	6	High
7	There is no acceptable space in my house to work remotely.	4.532	0.214	4	High
8	I had to work from different places at home while working remotely.	4.310	0.312	5	High
9	work remotely time sometimes extends to the detriment of family time.	4.542	0.211	3	High
10	Work remotely permeates some family intersections.	4.802	0.016	1	High
11	Sometimes there is noise and disturbance from family members that affects the running of work remotely.	4.631	0.192	2	High
12	Sometimes I have to postpone remote work due to urgent social and family circumstances.	4.215	0.352	7	High
13	Family members sometimes get fed up with my work remotely from home.	3.521	0.652	8	Moderate
14	Sometimes family members access and interfere in my work affairs while working remotely.	3.215	0.654	9	Moderate
Total		4.216	0.303		High

Table 5 shows that the respondents' perception of the challenges in the remote work environment in context of the COVID-19 pandemic was high, a total of 4.216. They ranked these challenges as follows:

1. Family conflict.
2. The noises of family members.
3. Extending work remotely time on family time.
4. The lack of a suitable place/office to work remotely.
5. Social and family emergency conditions.
6. Family discomfort from remote work.
7. Family interference in work affairs while working remotely.

The respondents' perceptions of a paragraph "extending the time for working remotely sometimes at the expense of family time". With a high degree, this result is consistent with Elagina (2020) and Hartig et al. (2007) who indicated the difficulty of reconciling work from home and life at home.

Q3: Does the level of challenges in the remote work environment differ according to the respondent's gender in the context of COVID-19 pandemic?

Table-6. T-test for the Rrespondents' Gender (Male, Female).

Gender	No	Mean	ST	T value	(Sig)
Male	85	4.02	0.70	4.82	*0.000
Female	40	4.63	0.60		

This question can be answered by testing the first hypothesis: there are no statistically significant differences at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) for the level of challenges in the remote work environment according to the respondents' gender (male/female) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 6 indicates that the value of T is 4.82, corresponding to the probability value (Sig) equal to 0.000 which is less than ($\alpha \leq 0.05$). Therefore, it can be said that there are statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) for the level of challenges in the remote work environment according to the gender (male/female) of workers in the ICT sector companies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These differences came in favor of the female gender. This is a logical result supported by reality, as the level of challenges in the remote work environment for a female employee is greater than for a male employee: when she performs her job duties from home, she has a conflict with her different roles as an employee, mother, wife and housewife, so the level of environmental challenges for her is greater than the level of her male colleague's challenges. This finding is partly consistent with Elagina (2020).

Q4: Does the level of challenges in the remote work environment differ according to the respondent's job (supervisory and non-supervisory) in the context of COVID-19 pandemic?. This question can be answered by testing the second hypothesis: there are no statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) for the level of challenges in the remote work environment according to the respondent's job: (supervisory job, non-supervisory job) in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 7 indicates that the value of T is 1.882, corresponding to the probability value (Sig) equal to 0.002 which is less than ($\alpha \leq 0.05$). Therefore, it can be said that there are statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) for the level of challenges in the remote work environment according to the respondent's job: (supervisory job, non-supervisory job) in context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These differences came in favor of the non-supervisory jobs.

This result is logical as workers in supervisory positions (upper management, middle management and lower management) and workers in non-supervisory jobs all practiced remote work during the pandemic and faced the same challenges; however, the level of challenges in the remote work environment for non-supervisory jobs was greater than that in supervisory jobs.

This is due to the nature of non-supervisory jobs, most of which are specialized executive jobs that require long hours due to the increase of work during the pandemic to provide information and communication technology services to customers.

The supervisory jobs are based on planning, organizing, directing and controlling, which make the level of challenges in the remote work environment for them less than that in the non-supervisory jobs. It can also be said that the occupants of supervisory positions are those with higher incomes, which helps them to improve the work environment at home by allocating a private office and providing all the amenities for working from home, unlike many in non-supervisory jobs.

Table-7. T-test for the Respondents' Job (Supervisory, Non-supervisory).

Job	No	Mean	ST	T value	(Sig)
Supervisory	18	3.968	0.52	1.882	*0.002
Non-supervisory	107	4.258	0.57		

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Essentially, the need to face the challenges in the remote work environment employees, families, and management must cooperate to overcome challenges, which will improve performance. First, employees who practice remote work must take measures that will improve their remote working environment. They must be able to carry out their duties with the highest degree of competence without expense to their family or to their own personal time. This can be accomplished by the following changes:

- Providing a specific and appropriate place to work in the home where all necessary equipment for work is available.
- Determining the duration and time of working remotely by setting a daily work schedule showing the required activities coupled with specific times. Family members are informed of these times.
- Completing family and social duties before the start of the set times for remote work.

Second, family members must understand the challenges of remote work and cooperate with the necessary conditions.

Third, managers must provide their employees with all the physical necessities to work remotely. They must also provide psychological and moral support for all employees who work remotely and not assign them work that requires more time than usual without an appropriate financial allowance. They must also not communicate with them outside the official working hours except under the most urgent circumstances.

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