

-RESEARCH ARTICLE-

OPERATING IN A NEW PARADIGM: EXPLORING WORKPLACE RECONFIGURATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19**Saeed T. Alshahrani**

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Email: stshahrani@imamu.edu.sa<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5289-9060>**—Abstract—**

Globally, the present epidemic has had an immediate impact on the labour force. Historically, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in particular, has not established flexible work arrangements. However, due to the epidemic, the existing systems have been altered to support remote and flexible employment. While the concepts of flexible contracts, remote work, and alternative work arrangements have been extensively discussed in the management literature, the employment conditions created by COVID-19 are unprecedented. The purpose of this study is to build on and fill a gap in the existing literature by examining the impact of workplace reconfiguration in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of employees across multiple industries. The study reveals that the nature of each employee's experience with flexible or remote work dynamics in the Saudi context is influenced by the level of organisational preparedness, the cost to employees, and the socioeconomic disparity. While the study's findings indicate that employees' experiences with remote work are typically good, organisations should take steps to address these concerns to promote employee well-being, which is associated with improved organisational outcomes.

Keywords; Flexible working, Covid-19, Flexible contracts, alternative working arrangements, Saudi Arabia, Workplace Reconfiguration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread the globe, wreaking havoc on economies and societies and profoundly altering the way we work and conduct business. In pandemic and post-pandemic situations, a sizable portion of the workforce

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has been unable to commute to work to contain the virus' spread. This has increased demand for more flexible work arrangements for both companies and employees (S. Ahmed et al., 2021). As a result, governments worldwide, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, have made flexible contracts a strategic priority.

Globally, the present epidemic has directly and immediately affected the labor force (Spurk & Straub, 2020). In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development's recent "flexible work system" has provided private-sector workers with many chances to secure previously unattainable employment through flexible contracts and other supportive measures. At the same time, the concept of flexible contracts has been explored in the management literature (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; G. Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019), as well as alternative working arrangements in general (Spreitzer, 2017) the circumstances surrounding current employment conditions as a result of COVID-19 are truly unprecedented (Spurk & Straub, 2020). The research issue that motivates this study is how the new pandemic-induced flexible work needs have impacted employee workplace dynamics in Saudi Arabia.

When it comes down to it, the coronavirus pandemic is nothing more than the sole probable form of the Third World War. While it is impossible to compare the magnitude of casualties and destruction to earlier disasters, the impact on politics, the economy, society, and consciousness is comparable. And with that, the most modern technologies, which have evolved tremendously over the last two decades, have been waiting for the appropriate spark to ignite a new great civilizational revolution, which has finally arrived (G. Petriglieri, Ashford, S., & Wrzesniewski, A, 2018). Traditional workspaces are becoming outmoded, and changes in our lives, particularly economic considerations, are compelling businesses to rethink their business models and develop new modes of operation. Traditional work environments rapidly fade in relevance (Spurk & Straub, 2020). Numerous businesses are currently experimenting with a variety of flexible work arrangements, in addition to a true rethinking of jobs and more employee involvement. These agreements are meant to increase employee motivation and performance by granting employees additional flexibility regarding where, when, and how they execute their jobs (Spurk & Straub, 2020).

By building on prior research on changing workplace conditions and exceptional employment circumstances, such as more flexible and temporary work arrangements, this study sheds light on how the new labour regulations affect employer-employee relationships in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 era. This study employs qualitative empirical methods, such as formal semi-structured interviews with individuals in various industries in Saudi Arabia, to examine how changes in daily working conditions, such as work hours and supervisor/co-worker communication, affect the employer-employee relationship across a variety of industries. Qualitative research is the preferable strategy for elucidating the circumstances surrounding such a

rare occurrence, mainly when the investigation is exploratory in nature (Döringer, 2021). The goal is to establish a foundation of understanding for this changing environment to provide support and management insight to Saudi Arabian organisational leaders.

Along with addressing this contextual gap, this article contributes new knowledge by examining an unprecedented, unprecedented rapid society-wide workplace reconfiguration, where non-volitional reconfiguration is the norm, and digital reality enables working reconfigurations across modes of work that were previously considered tangential.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 COVID-19 and the Shift Towards Flexible Work Arrangements

Existing research indicates that, despite the liberties associated with working outside of a formal organisational framework, the same experience can have a detrimental effect on productivity and the appearance of unexpected strains as a result of unstructured workplace conditions and contracts (G. Petriglieri et al., 2019). Apart from the new labour measures that have a global impact on employment relationships, previous research indicates that higher- and lower-skilled workers experience alternative work arrangements differently (Spreitzer, 2017). Additionally, the experience (and performance) of employees hired temporarily with a shorter term is unique from those hired permanently with permanent employment conditions and contracts (Guillaume, Sullivan, Wolff, & Forret, 2019). As such, there is the possibility of both positive and negative consequences for individuals working outside of a traditional office environment, as well as for teams as a whole (Plomp, Tims, Khapova, Jansen, and Bakker (2019); (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020), which has a significant impact on management (Foster, Hassard, Morris, & Wolfram Cox, 2019).

2.2 Workplace Reconfiguration in Saudi Arabia

As a result of COVID-19, flexible working arrangements and flexible contracts have become increasingly frequent and necessary. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in developing a domestic flexible work system to help contain the spread of the virus, strengthen employer-employee relationships, and improve economic outcomes during and after a pandemic.

On 4 November 2020, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSD) unveiled a "flexible work system" as part of the National Transformation Program's (NTP) Labor Reform Initiative (LRI), which took effect on 14 March 2021 (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2020). This project aimed to strengthen the contractual relationship between employees and employers to forward the Government's vision of creating a robust work environment and empowering both employees and companies. Flexible work systems entail steps to

improve the Saudi labour market's flexibility, efficacy, and competitiveness, including flexible digital contracts.

2.3 Flexible Work Systems, Employer-Employee Relationships and Workplace Dynamics

Employer-employee relationship

Since the inception of COVID-19, there has been a global movement in employment best practices toward encouraging employees to work from home and ensuring that it is done efficiently (Alshurideh, 2021). Flexible working hours have become the new norm.

There is some evidence that the flexibility of remote working practices – in which employees have greater control over their work hours – can benefit both companies and employees. From the employee's perspective, flexibility can demonstrate confidence in allowing employees to fulfill their tasks and obligations while maintaining a satisfying work-life balance (Ninaus, Diehl, & Terlutter, 2021). From an employer's perspective, flexible working arrangements are believed to increase employee productivity and their commitment and devotion to the firm (Alias, 2021).

The reengineering of the post-COVID-19 economy has already resulted in a rethinking of employment patterns in general, to foster more harmonious employer-employee relationships (Webb, McQuaid, & Rand, 2020). The literature indicates that post-COVID-19, the private sector is moving toward more horizontal employer-employee relationships centred on the key themes of increased teamwork, collaboration, and communication (Parveen, 2020). Human resource departments are increasingly promoting employee well-being and healthy employee-employer connections throughout the private sector through techniques such as people management, high-level communication, supervision, higher productivity, and performance management (Urbancova, 2019).

Productivity

The workplace environment has been shown to significantly affect worker productivity (Alifuddin, 2021). Working from home and having a more flexible schedule might provide employees more freedom to complete projects according to their schedule and with fewer interruptions than they would in the office. However, technological challenges such as inadequate internet connection and others may jeopardise the benefits of flexible work arrangements (Alifuddin, 2021). According to studies, tailoring employees' work arrangements benefits employers because certain individuals benefit from a more flexible remote work environment, while others may find working from home irritating, upsetting, or otherwise undesirable (Guillaume et al., 2019).

According to Alessa, Alotaibie, (Parveen, 2020), while the pandemic had a detrimental effect on corporate productivity and profitability in certain sectors, there was no visible

effect on staff efficiency particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A crucial component of adopting suitable flexible contracts is for firms to strengthen their digital capabilities to support employees' ability to perform their jobs conveniently and successfully (Romero-Tena, Barragán-Sánchez, Llorente-Cejudo, & Palacios-Rodríguez, 2020). As a result of this trend toward digitalization and a shift toward online platforms, traditional employment arrangements have been altered to become more adaptable and supportive of employee development and productivity (Ratten, 2020).

Work-life balance

When establishing and implementing flexible work arrangements, it is critical to maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Since COVID-19, Saudi Arabia's labour market has been more dynamic, and the Government has implemented efforts to strengthen the employer-employee relationship through increased flexibility (Al-Youbi, Al-Hayani, Rizwan, & Choudhry, 2020). According to S. M. K. M. Ahmed, N (2021), numerous firms are shifting to more flexible, remote, and increasingly digital work arrangements in response to COVID-19. They conducted in-depth interviews with employees across Saudi Arabian companies to determine the behavioural effects of working from home as part of a flexible employment contract. They discovered that when employees worked flexibly from home, their attitudes were more positive and their self-efficacy increased. Employee autonomy, scheduling flexibility, and access to suitable technical resources have all been demonstrated to increase employee work-life balance, job satisfaction, productivity, and performance outcomes (Jamal, Anwar, Khan, & Saleem, 2021).

On the other hand, remote work can cause a disconnect between employees' professional and personal lives, resulting in stress and tiredness and decreased employee performance (Al-Youbi et al., 2020). Specific stressors may include workload constraints, a sense of isolation from colleagues, and family interference (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019). These concerns, if left neglected, can put a strain on effective ongoing employer-employee relationships (Jamal et al., 2021). Additionally, employees who work flexibly from home may be more prone to fuzzy work-life boundaries, resulting in work exhaustion (Alifuddin, 2021).

Because human capital is a critical asset for every firm, competent human resources are critical in any business, and much more so in light of COVID-19's consequences. According to Allam (2020), six critical variables contribute to an employee's higher quality of life at work and improve overall employer-employee relationships: autonomy, intergroup interactions, recognition, economic advantages, self-respect, and supervisory relations. Additionally, it was determined that management must enrich the work environment by providing adequate skill training opportunities for employee growth and development, allowing employees to participate in organisational decision-making processes and develop a sense of ownership, rewarding employees for superior performance, as well as providing job security and flexible work arrangements.

Job security and higher and lower-skilled workers

Job security is a critical component of an effective, functioning flexible contract that has a substantial impact on employer-employee interactions. Job insecurity has been a serious concern in the aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic, owing to widespread redundancies (Webb et al., 2020). Increased employment market regulation is important to protect employees, give them a greater sense of job security, and foster beneficial employer-employee relationships. According to a study conducted by Webb, McQuaid, and Webb et al. (2020), temporary or contingent workers with short-term contracts are more significantly impacted than permanent employees. This is partly due to the less secure nature of quick work, particularly in the "gig economy," where workers are hired on a task-by-task basis rather than being employed in a single function with a single employer. While recent studies indicate that many workers benefit from flexible working arrangements, more robust legal and workplace policy safeguards – such as those implemented by the Saudi Government – are necessary to mitigate negative consequences, such as employers being able to terminate casual or temporary workers without following formal procedures quickly.

Additionally, it is critical to recognise that increased flexibility in work arrangements affects both highly and low-skilled individuals differently. Employees in higher-skilled jobs with a higher level of education and increased compensation may be significantly more likely to enjoy fully compensated, secure work-from-home positions. In contrast, employees in lower-skilled jobs may be dismissed more frequently or offered less flexibility in their work arrangements (Alshurideh, 2021). While fear of job loss or income reduction is a legitimate issue for any worker on any sort of contract, lower-skilled or unskilled workers are particularly vulnerable (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020).

Education sector

While the epidemic has had a broad influence on various industries, the education sector has been particularly hard hit. Worldwide, educational institutions ranging from primary schools to colleges and research organisations have been forced to close to safeguard students' safety, frequently children and adolescents, and employees (Srinivasan, Ramos, & Muhammad, 2021). By April 2020, UNESCO calculated that lockdowns had impacted about 1.5 billion students in 138 countries, and the impact has continued due to government-mandated social distance restrictions (S. M. K. M. Ahmed, N, 2021; Mukherjee, 2021). As a result, the education sector has shifted toward remote technology-based learning, which is expected to have beneficial and harmful consequences (S. Ahmed et al., 2021).

Numerous negative consequences of the pandemic have been felt in the education sector, including job losses and reduced opportunities, a lack of digital infrastructure, unequal access to technology, logistical challenges in preparing educational resources, and

increased reliance on parents to educate their children (Gunasekaran, 2021; Nautiyal, 2021; Srinivasan et al., 2021). Even though e-learning has become the standard, there is a dispute in the literature on its effectiveness and implications for students and teachers, with (Hendryka, 2018) showing that positive short-term effectiveness decreased over time when lockdowns remained. While the literature indicates no substitute for direct human interaction, e-learning approaches are constantly being developed to provide an adequate substitute. They can potentially change future learning as the industry becomes more robust and innovative (Mukherjee, 2021; Srinivasan et al., 2021).

Gender dynamics

It is critical for pandemic workplace reconfiguration attempts to take gender differences into account. Flexible work arrangements have hugely impacted women's personal and professional lives in Saudi Arabia's workplace landscape (Srinivasan et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the difficulties women encounter when managing parenting and work responsibilities in an era where the barriers between home and work have grown increasingly blurred. The findings revealed that more could be done to support women across the Kingdom in order to create improved management, work satisfaction, and productivity, all of which contribute to enhanced well-being and economic benefits.

Many families had a more excellent home and childcare chores during the pandemic, particularly during lockdowns, although expectations around gender roles remained primarily unchanged. COVID-19 has significantly exacerbated the unequal division of household duties and childcare, requiring women to shoulder an increased domestic workload of chores, home-schooling, and the mental load associated with family care, in addition to their professional responsibilities while working from home (Carlson, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). According to Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2021), the extraordinary lockdown tactics exacerbated existing gender inequities within family systems.

While schools and childcare services were closed, parents were left with greater responsibility for educating and caring for their children, with mothers more likely to bear this burden than fathers (Carlson, 2020). While remote work can provide women with benefits such as increased work-life balance and flexibility, employed women have been required to maintain productivity in their professional work while also taking on an increased workload of unpaid domestic work, requiring a tricky balancing act (Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Kabeer, Razavi, & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021). As a result, the border between personal and professional life has become increasingly blurred, resulting in greater stress, anxiety, and loneliness among women (Clark et al., 2021; Fisher & Ryan, 2021).

3. METHODS

The study employed an inductive qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. Given the pandemic's distinctive character in human history, the quick workplace changes are also unusual and hence have not been researched earlier. As a result, qualitative methodologies are preferred for this type of investigation (Feldman, 2019; Yin, 2016). Because the purpose of this study is to ascertain how the workplace experience has changed since the pandemic began, the interview protocol included temporal questions that probed interviewees' perceptions of their work and their new virtual workplace and how they have changed since the pandemic started. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was purposefully chosen as the research context because remote and flexible work arrangements were not as prevalent as in other nations, necessitating rapid and, in some circumstances, severe transformation inside Saudi Arabian workplaces.

Sample and data collection

Theoretical sampling was used to identify research volunteers who could help us make sense of workplace reconfiguration during COVID-19. This was initially accomplished by placing adverts in local employee forums and workforce websites. Due to the poor response rate from potential participants to the initial call, snowball sampling was used to enhance the sample size. A total of 21 interviews were performed with Saudi Arabian personnel from various industries. The sample was purposefully not limited to a single industry or sector to understand the broader influence on all sectors across the country. Due to the lockdown conditions and the geographical range of the respondents, all interviews were conducted digitally using Zoom or Google Hangouts. Each interview lasted roughly 30 minutes, totaling approximately nine hours, resulting in a total of 195 pages of transcribed material. The sample's descriptive characteristics are listed in Table 1. The interview procedure in Appendix A was designed to elicit information on how remote workplace developments impacted employees.

Data analysis

The Gioia technique (Gioia, 2021) was utilised for the thematic analysis to provide rigour in the inductive qualitative data analysis (Gioia, 2021). This procedure contributes to developing a knowledge of the phenomenon being studied by participating in thematic analysis, producing sets of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (see figure 1. Study findings). These 'levels' of analysis enable us to comprehend an event from both global and granular viewpoints. Iterative coding was used to begin, as is recommended for qualitative investigations of this sort (Yin, 2016). Following the collecting of the initial few interviews, the initial coding began to ascertain which themes were emerging and whether further questions should be added to the procedure. Several common themes emerged following the first coding, most notably concerning the employee's favourable or negative experiences with remote work. After identifying these themes, the data analysis process progressed to more focused coding

(Miles, 1994) which eventually resulted in axial coding to support the more significant themes regarding demographics and the organization's response to the new, necessary remote work changes to meet the pandemic's needs.

Table 1: Interviewee Details

Interview #	Gender	Country of Origin	Industry	Role
1	M	Philippines	Development	Executive Assistant
2	F	Yemen	Education	Teacher
3	M	Sri Lanka	Technology	Engineer
4	F	Saudi Arabia	Marketing	Marketer
5	M	India	Manufacturing	Procurement
6	M	Saudi Arabia	Investment	Finance Specialist
7	M	Pakistan	Telecommunications	Maintenance
8	F	Philippines	Health	Nurse
9	F	Saudi Arabia	Ministry of Tourism	Researcher
10	M	Saudi Arabia	Technology	Systems Analyst
11	F	Sudan	Medical	Phlebotomist
12	F	India	Education	Teacher
13	M	India	Technology	Engineer
14	F	South Sudan	Education	Teacher
15	M	India	Procurement	Purchasing Officer
16	F	Saudi Arabia	Medical	System Analyst
17	M	India	Education	Teacher
18	M	Pakistan	Medical	Accountant
19	M	India	Finance	Investment
20	M	Pakistan	Technology	Supply Chain Support
21	F	India	Customer Service	Call Centre Support

4. FINDINGS

Although the interviewees worked in various industries, patterns emerged from their shared experiences that were consistent across contexts. Individuals interviewed across various sectors shared a common understanding of three major themes: organisational preparation, personnel costs, and socioeconomic difference. The overall level of readiness for remote work was crucial in how employees felt supported after the pandemic began and remote work policies were introduced in Saudi Arabia and throughout the world. More precisely, the technology tools and training provided to

employees and the organization's response and communication became critical factors in how employees dealt with the pandemic's effects. The data revealed both good and negative consequences of remote work, and how individuals experienced remote work shifts varied according to their socioeconomic circumstances. The complete findings are shown in [Figure 1](#).

Level of organizational preparedness

The level of organisational preparedness, which includes the organization's response time and the tools in place for remote work, significantly impacted how many employees faced disruptions during the pandemic. Existing flexible workplace arrangements contributed significantly to employees' favourable experiences with remote work in several firms. For instance, if the organisation already had a formal work-from-home policy or permitted virtual meetings, the move was far easier on all parties. According to one employee in such an organisation, his working relationship with his boss is as follows:

Before the pandemic, me and my boss already have an understanding that I can work as flexible as I can be... My boss will not ask me, did you come to the office? Did you do this one? No, as long as I'm doing my work, done. That's it. So, what I'm trying to say is, before the pandemic, we already started practicing flexible work arrangement""." (Interviewee #1)

Due to the pre-existing trust between employer and employee (Ninaus et al., 2021), no new levels of trust needed to be established, and the shift to totally remote working was nearly seamless. Indeed, the employee in the same scenario believed that his work arrangement grew easier once the pandemic began:

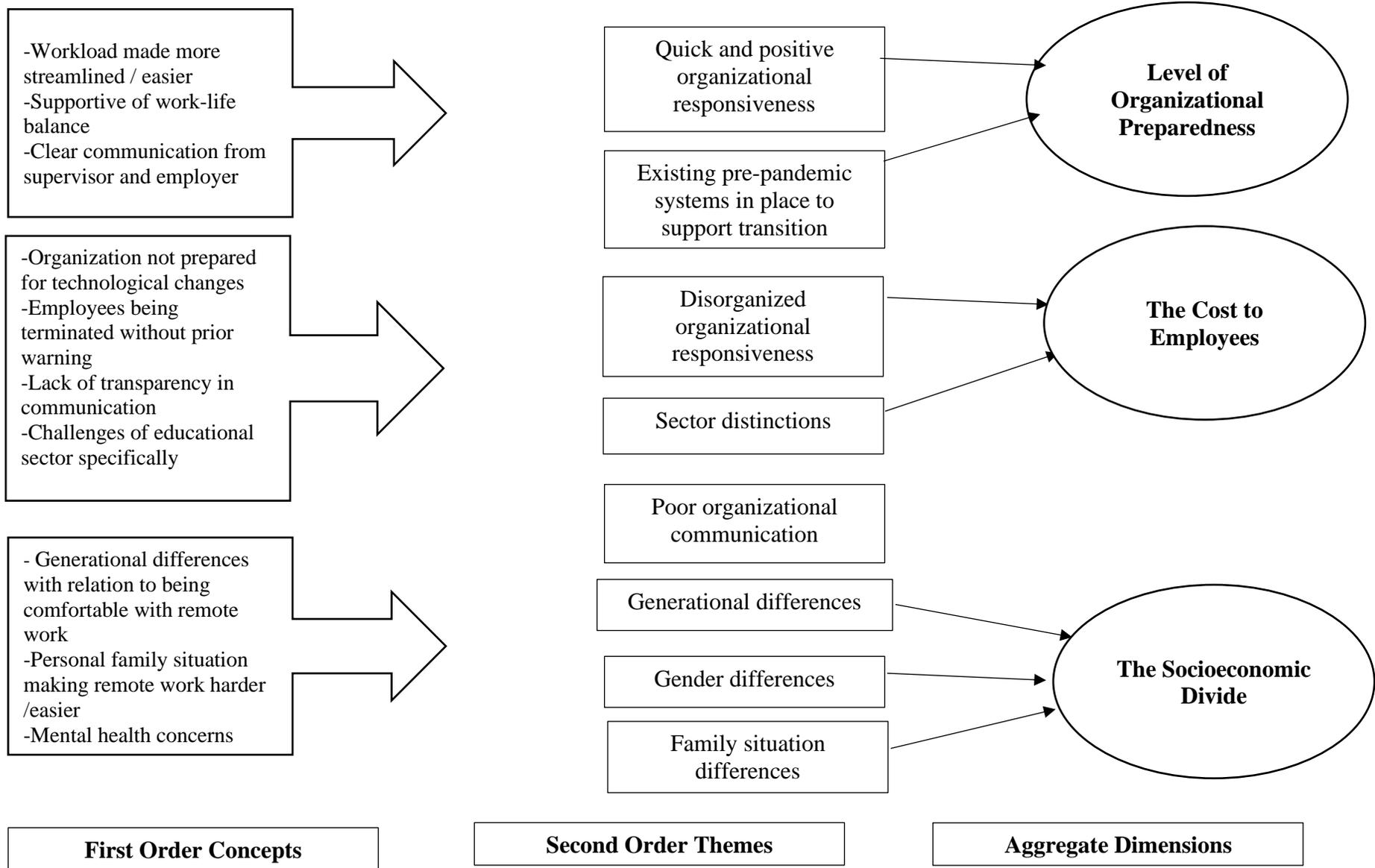
So, when the pandemic came, it became much better, became much broader. So, I only come to the office if I really need him to sign an ink signature. That's it. So, when the pandemic started, I can say maybe once a week, or sometimes one time, a fortnight. Because nowadays, even signature can be [done with] DocuSign (Interviewee #1)

When considering the experiences of his colleagues and how the entire workplace experienced changes during the pandemic, the same interviewee further explained:

And frankly speaking, employees are happy working at home (Interviewee #1)

In some workplaces, the company went even further. Not only did they ensure that technological needs were met, but they also provided full salaries, even for the period during which some employees were unable to work:

Figure 1: Study Findings



"So, certainly, when this pandemic started, we were lucky. Our company is very good. They asked us to stay at home for three months. 'Don't care about the salary, you will get your salary on time, just wait for the good time and try to protect yourself.' This is the best thing which I have seen in Saudi Arabia, especially (Interviewee #18)

Employees who had favourable experiences with rapid pandemic-induced adjustments worked for firms with transparent ways of communication with employees, a loving virtual work environment, and technology readiness for the changes required by remote work.

Cost to employees

Another significant topic that emerged from the data is the entire cost of remote work to employees, including chaotic organisation responsiveness, sector distinctions, and ineffective organisational communication.

Employees in various industries saw a reduction in work as a result of market changes caused by the pandemic, including redundancies and job losses, while in other areas, workloads grew, but staff numbers stayed constant, putting a burden on current employees:

"We ended up working longer hours, more random hours. We had to work weekends at times, initially, at least. So, it did increase the workload in a way. But at the same time, it offered me the opportunity of spending time on transport and saving time, like changing and getting ready for work and everything. So, save some time there. But then again, it took more of your free time mentally. Actually, in the sense that you have to do more work at extra hours (Interview #6)

In many health-related businesses where labour was classified as essential and required physical contact with other people, workplaces were unprepared for the changes brought about by the pandemic, and supervisors failed to communicate appropriately with employees about procedures and expectations:

"So, our boss, he's actually the CEO, so he didn't actually do the physical work. Most of the time, he was at home, and it was really hard to catch him. Like morning times, he didn't answer his phone, late evenings he used to contact us and be like okay, tomorrow there is work." (Interviewee #11)

This created further stress for the entire team, in this case, a group of phlebotomists:

"And then two days from then, are we coming or we're not coming? So, he wasn't really that transparent with us with our jobs, honestly. He left us hanging for a really long time." (Interviewee #11)

There was both mental health and financial cost to the employees in this situation:

"Because our job is all with going outside, you know, having contact with the patients, and we were not having that. So, we just kind of sat with our thoughts a lot. Unfortunately, he wasn't transparent with us at all." (Interviewee #11)

This topic emphasised sector distinctions since other service-oriented businesses, such as education, were influenced differently than other types of organisations. According to one secondary school teacher, the measures and modifications were unexpected:

"So, I think in our mind, we were thinking that there's no way it's going to stop like one day and that's it. And I remember, we even had like, the end of year dance and that thing, we were just dancing with the girls, and it was normal. Like, I know we all had like our sanitise, it was starting to get into like the COVID. But we still all had hopes that nothing's going to happen and we're not going to go into lockdown. Because the measures here were so good." (Interviewee #2)

Even though her school communicated well with staff, the overall shift did not occur entirely seamlessly:

"And then, like suddenly, one day, they were like, no more school and we were at home at that time. They were like, no more school and nobody's going to go to school the next day and you have to continue online. We had already planned, if it were online, what we were going to do, but I don't think we planned enough, honestly." (Interviewee #2)

There also seemed to be a learning curve for the teachers in that the first few weeks of the transition period were more challenging, and the teachers eventually adjusted to the new process to make the following weeks easier:

"But it was not easy to do everything online. So, the first few weeks were not really great. But then the second year since we knew where we were heading, and we knew how things were going to be, this past year has been really good. We've managed homework, everything's in order, everything's done properly. We do sometimes have connection problems, but I don't think it should even be mentioned, because it's everywhere" (Interviewee #2)

Other teachers emphasized that the pandemic and shift to remote working required them to provide an additional layer of pastoral care for their students to support them personally, stating:

"We have to manage student psychology because they are right now complete locked in (their) home. So, we have to keep that in mind whenever we're teaching them. So that's a difficult challenge." (Interviewee #12)

In particular, the one-on-one personal connection and bond with students have been harder to forge in a remote learning environment:

"There are the negative impacts of totally online classes, especially in this age group. And the trust, the confidence with what we used to have in the physical classes, it also has gone down. When the teachers and students meet daily on a one-to-one basis, we have another type of bonding. And in the online classes, this bonding is something else. This is more, you know, a professional relationship." (Interviewee #17)

Socioeconomic divide

The third main issue to emerge from the data was the socioeconomic divide, which is defined by variations in age, gender, and family situations.

One male respondent described his interactions with his wife and other female family members as follows, which was consistent with the experiences of several other interviewees:

"For me, it is okay, because we are outside, we can move easily. It's also dependent upon the culture. Here, there is a restriction in culture. Now it's improving day-by-day, but still, for the women, I personally think it's very hard for them." (Interviewee #18)

The gender distinctions also reflected the fact that the pandemic blurred the barriers between work and life, such that female respondents who previously worked outside the home were now expected to be "on duty" at all times as their personal and professional lives intermingled while working from home:

"I think there's been a consistent blurring of lines between again how accessible employees are since digital communication has become a thing. Since I mean you're so easily accessible on WhatsApp and it's no longer email. You can no longer say that you didn't see it because your office laptop was closed, you're away, and whenever it's your family or not." (Interview #6)

Some of the interviewees had advice for their superiors about how they could have been better supported by the organizations in which they worked:

"Like, I believe something better could have been done in a way to make us feel that we are all in this together. Like it is just a saying. It doesn't mean much. We are suffering equally, some more than others, but we are all suffering. So yeah, I think how they could have done it, maybe just send everyone something perhaps, or organize a meeting, among each other. Communicate what they want to see if they have any misconceptions or something like that. Yeah, that would be nice." (Interviewee #5)

Even with all the potential disadvantages that remote work may bring, many interviewees felt that the flexible work arrangements brought positive changes to their lives:

"And I think it's much better. I always wanted to work remotely because meetings are online. Compared to we're going to the offices, where we drive our cars and we go to

the office, I have a meeting. But right now, everything is much better. We're saving time, saving cost." (Interviewee #9)

Travel, in particular, poses a high cost and time concern for many employees. Therefore, one of the advantages of working from home was eliminating the stresses associated with the daily commute:

"I would actually prefer to work from home, by the way, because of the comfort. Basically, you don't have to travel all the way to the office and then coming back, you know it's quite tiring." (Interviewee #21)

When there was a lack of income coming in from traditional employment, some people sought out alternative ways of gathering income, such as teaching online language and fitness classes:

"So, I started to give, I mean I was planning to give Zumba classes, but it didn't work out." (Interviewee #11)

Based on the data, this was a common practice as employees sought to build alternate income streams, but there were mixed levels of success among the interviewees who engaged in this.

5. DISCUSSION

The study's research topic is as follows: How have new pandemic-related flexible workplace rules impacted employee workplace dynamics in Saudi Arabia? The inductive qualitative approach reveals that the remote work arrangements developed in response to the pandemic had positive and harmful consequences for individuals and employers. This study fills a need in the literature by examining how flexible work arrangements apply in the Saudi Arabian setting, and the themes that emerge from the data can also be applied more broadly to other contexts. While the sample size was admittedly small, it is worth noting that the sample included interviewees from various industries, and common themes arose between them. This indicates that a sizable proportion of Saudi Arabian individuals are experiencing similar effects due to the transition to remote work. Organizations that had already implemented flexible work arrangements before the pandemic could respond more swiftly and efficiently to the adjustments, which employees warmly received. On the other side, companies that had not previously allowed for any degree of flexibility in work arrangements were less prepared for the abrupt changes, and employees felt less supported as a result. In general, employees valued the organization's communication and the clarity of its communications.

Furthermore, the epidemic demonstrated that several sectors, including education, were technologically unprepared for the possibility of remote labour, let alone to have it foisted upon them to an unprecedented degree. As one educator put it:

"We have to be developing ourselves to be ready for anything that will come. Who knows? The pandemic now it's subsiding, but we never know what is coming next. So, we should be aware of that, and so we'll be on point with the rest of the world." (Interviewee 14)

As Alifuddin (2021) emphasise, an institution's readiness to execute rapid remote workplace changes required by a pandemic is highly dependent on access to high-speed dependable internet and other critical technology. This concept was reflected in the general recommendations of participants to their employers:

"It should be well-organized and the job descriptions should be made clear to the people. The automation of the process. And it also has to be made sure whether the people who are working remotely have good facilities, electricity and internet and all that stuff, so it doesn't hamper the work." (Interviewee #19)

Additionally, the data indicated that there is room for a different perspective on the effects of remote work on workplace dynamics, since many people were even more productive and efficient while working remotely:

"The best thing is just saving time. Like we work nine hours, you can finish everything in four or five hours. The other four hours, you can use it on other thing(s)." (Interviewee #16)

Another interviewee emphasized the same sentiment in the sample:

"They had in mind that a guy sitting at home is not working. I told you, in one year, we did work which could be done in two years." (Interviewee #20)

As The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continues to deal with the effects of the pandemic, this study indicates it is crucial for human resources and management within enterprises to understand the benefits flexible remote working may offer employees. It is also critical for firms to ensure that remote work policies are executed properly, communicated clearly and that employees have enough technological and supervisory assistance since this can boost employee motivation and productivity, resulting in superior organisational outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION

The unusual events surrounding the COVID-19 epidemic ushered in a sea change in worldwide working practices. Changes must be adopted quickly in most workplaces across a range of industries where remote working was not previously the norm. The case of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is particularly unique in that workplace flexibility was not a widespread practice prior to the pandemic. Thus this period has necessitated significant learning for organisations to adjust to new working conditions and served as a litmus test for how prepared Saudi organisations would be for long-term flexible work

arrangements. The outcomes of this survey indicate that many employees' experiences with remote work have been overwhelmingly beneficial. According to the research, there is considerable interest in potentially retaining flexibility in future workplace arrangements when pandemic limitations loosen, as provided as the organisation in which they work is equipped for the necessary technological and sociodemographic changes. The current findings indicate that remote work arrangements implemented in response to the pandemic's effects have had beneficial and negative consequences for employees at various levels inside firms. Individuals' experiences with these changes can be related to whether pre-pandemic structures and technology existed to facilitate remote work, how quickly the business responded to the new adjustments required, and how successfully the organisation managed its reaction. In combination with sociodemographic disparities between firms, all of these characteristics contributed to differences in how employees across all sectors experienced pandemic-induced workplace disruptions.

7. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Although workers have mainly favourable experiences with the new work configurations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift has been challenging, and issues persist. What has been demonstrated is that, in the digital age, a sizable portion of modern labour may be performed remotely, or at least outside the long-established traditional ways of employment. Given that such a dramatic and unexpected shift may occur in places such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where workplace flexibility was previously unheard of, it appears as though we have entered a new era of working habits. It is possible that completely new regulations, organisational structures, and personnel training will be required.

In this study, preparedness on the side of workers and organisations was revealed as a critical factor affecting the success of working transitions and workers' satisfaction levels. While technology and circumstance have enabled flexible employment, organisations and individuals are still ill-equipped to deal with this new reality. The study focuses on preparedness will benefit everyone in the future.

8. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Time-consuming exploratory qualitative research approaches frequently necessitate smaller sample sizes, as was the case with this study's sample of 21 participants. This restricts the findings' generalizability. Participants were recruited from a variety of industries to develop a comprehensive picture of COVID-19 workplace reconfigurations, as workplace reconfigurations are expected to be influenced by industry and job type. While this is a virtue of the research methodology, it also introduces additional generalizability constraints, given the participants' diverse employment contexts.

Finally, the study concluded at a point in time when participants had only undergone a one-year workplace reconfiguration as a result of COVID-19. Their working setups and their experiences and attitudes about them are expected to evolve in this new working paradigm. Employer preparedness was also poor, owing to the shift's quick and unexpected nature. Employee opinions and employer preparation levels should be viewed as the situation- and time-dependent, and hence are subject to change.

9. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The demand for study in this area is increasing as it becomes clear that many of the new workplace configurations created by the COVID-19 epidemic are likely to persist and evolve further, rather than reverting to earlier modes of operation. The exploratory study's findings can be elaborated upon to advise and guide current and future flexible work arrangements. Three primary difficulties were highlighted in this analysis, each of which merits further investigation: organisational preparation, personnel costs, and socioeconomic disparity.

Both large-scale within- and across-industry studies will be beneficial as society transitions from a crisis-response model (COVID-19-driven change) to a post-crisis age in which remote working and other novel configurations may have a prominent role. The post-crisis paradigm may allow people, organisations, and nations to support and enhance new modes of work in a less 'rapid-response' manner, thereby addressing some of the challenges currently affecting our modern working lives.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Explanation
(HRSD)	Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development
(LRI)	Labor Reform Initiative
(NTP)	National Transformation Program

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Please explain which company you work for and what role you hold there.
2. What is the nature of your current contract with this company (i.e. is it a flexible contract)?
3. When did you begin this contract with the organization?

4. Please describe your career prior to obtaining this particular contract.
5. Has your flexible work arrangement changed since the pandemic began? If so, how?
6. What is your relationship like with your immediate manager/superior/boss?
7. Does the nature of your contract influence your relationship with your immediate manager/superior/boss?
8. How would you describe the communication within your company during the pandemic?
9. Is this different than prior to the pandemic?
10. Has the nature of the communication with your immediate manager/superior/boss changed since the pandemic began? If so, how?
11. What do you see as the advantages of remote work?
12. What are the disadvantages of remote work?
13. How do you think the effects of remote work are different for women and men?
14. Were there any job losses in your workplace after the pandemic (and as a result of it)? If so, how were they handled?
15. Is there any other way that your company or supervisor could have supported you over the last year?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your current work arrangement and specifically about how it has changed during the pandemic?

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