

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AFFECTING ON
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY EMPLOYEES IN SRI LANKA DUE TO THE
CONCEPT OF WORK FROM HOME DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disastrous impact on organizations and changed most employees' working methods. Since the beginning of the pandemic, researchers have been researching and publishing their studies on the impact on both remote-working and non-remote-working employees. The current study was conducted more than one and a half years after the pandemic initially started, focusing on the long-term impact of working from home (WFH). The study uses a qualitative thematic analysis approach to identify factors that impact WFH employees in Sri Lanka during COVID-19. Ten in-depth interviews have been conducted with employees in the Information Technology sector who have worked from home since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper provides insight into different factors affecting employees who worked from home during the pandemic. The study findings will aid the decision-makers of organizations in taking the necessary actions to make working from home more comfortable.

Keywords: COVID-19, IT sector, Psychological factors, Thematic analysis, Work from home

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INTRODUCTION

Justification of research and objectives: The term 'telecommuting' was coined for the first time in the 1970s by Niles (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Teleworking was first introduced in the United States as a solution to the oil crisis (Allen, Golden and Shockle, 2015). Although it was not introduced recently, full-time teleworking was new for most employees in countries such as Sri Lanka. "Teleworking" or "Working from home (WFH)" gained popularity as an alternative working method during the pandemic. Due to travel restrictions and the curfew imposed by the government, organizations had to adapt to the practice of WFH almost immediately. Therefore, it was not a choice but forced upon the organization due to circumstances. When working from home for a considerable period without having a choice, there could be adverse effects on the employee. Limited studies conducted during previous studies have revealed a severe mental impact on the population after the pandemic (Huremović, 2020). The research conducted during the COVID-19 period has mainly focused on the measures taken by countries to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the economic impact, the organizational impact, and the impact on front-line workers. Only a handful of research has been done in Sri Lanka and other developing economies regarding the impact on employees other than front-line workers. Initially, many organizations faced numerous challenges when adapting to the WFH practice. There is a need to identify the most significant psychological factors affecting employees working from home, as this method will continue even after the pandemic and into the future. The results from the study would primarily help the employers of Sri Lanka to understand the effect of WFH on the employees. Also, there is a need to focus on getting the most out of WFH in the current context where it is no longer an option for employees.

Research Objectives

- 1) To determine how the working practices of employees in the IT sector in Sri Lanka have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2) To identify the most common psychological factors that affect Sri Lankan IT sector employees under mandatory work-from-home conditions.

3) To determine the impact of identified psychological factors on Sri Lankan IT sector employees under mandatory work-from-home conditions.

Literature Review

a) The impact of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka was the first country in South Asia to impose a nationwide lockdown during the early phase of the pandemic. These measures were taken to “Flatten the impact curve” and “Improve social distancing,” as they have been proven effective measures in countries such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore (Silva and Silva, 2020). The government's early actions against the pandemic included the closure of the airport, and the ports, tracing of recent returnees from overseas, transferring identified patients to hospitals, and suspected contacts were quarantined and isolated in more than forty quarantine centers.

Most Sri Lankans had to face economic hardships due to the long period of lockdown, which lasted for more than three months (Hettiarachchi, Noordeen and Gamakaranage, 2020). Considering the adverse impact on the economy, on the 11th of May 2020, the government ordered the opening of several offices and businesses under strict guidelines. It was mandatory to wear a mask inside premises, in outdoor public spaces, and on public transport. Sanitary measures such as having washbasins and sanitizers and other public places were instructed to use thermometers to check the temperatures of the citizens before they enter the premises.

The lockdown harmed the country's vital economic sectors, manufacturing, services, and especially the tourism sector, one of the country's key service sectors, contributing to around 5% of the country's Gross Domestic Production (Amaratunga, Fernando, Haigh, and Jayasinghe, 2020). Over 500,000 people are expected to have fallen

into poverty because of the crisis (The World Bank, 2021). The pandemic not only made people unwell but also affected their lifestyles and significantly impacted the economy of Sri Lanka as well. High levels of unemployment, loss of job security, and pay cuts resulted in anxiety and economic stress among the population. Especially the people living in the under-served settlements, which are daily wage earners, were mainly affected. Before the pandemic, face-to-face teaching and learning were practiced in Sri Lanka. Lockdown restrictions resulted in the closure of primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutes, and the government promoted the delivery of educational services online, resulting in a notable structural change could be seen in the Sri Lankan education sector.

b) Change in method of working

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Labor Organization estimated that 7.9% of the world's workforce (around 260 million workers) worked from home permanently (Berg, Bonnet and Soares, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a considerable number of employees working from home. Therefore, working from home has gained popularity during this time. Before the pandemic, employees were not used to working from home for a prolonged time period. The organizations had to adapt to this sudden change to support the employees. In the current context, working from home has become the "new normal" almost overnight (Wang, Liu, Qian, and Parker, 2021). Previous studies have revealed that around 40% of the jobs can be performed from home in developed countries such as the US and the UK, but in developing economies, it was only around 29.6–31.2% (Sutarto, Wardaningsih, and Putri, 2021). There is a possibility that both small- and large-scale organizations will adopt a hybrid approach to working in the future as they have realized that specific job roles can be carried out remotely. Currently, organizations such as Twitter and Facebook are permanently making specific roles remote (Sytych and Greer, 2020).

Teleworking can have both advantages and disadvantages from the perspective of the organization. Benefits include being cost-effective, ensuring business continuity even during economic downturns, reducing expenses for organizations (rent, maintenance, computers, equipment, and utilities), increasing workforce productivity, having the ability to work during their most productive time and being less distracted by co-workers (Nakrošienė, Bučiūnienė, and Goštautaitė, 2019), possibility to employ people who have difficulties in travelling to the office, increase females in labor force participation, reduced absenteeism, reduce the stress level of employees, increases the positive influence on the reputation of the company (Loia and Adinolfi, 2021). Teleworking can have more advantages than disadvantages for both the employees and the organization in a typical scenario. Nevertheless, the unexpected shift to mass teleworking during the pandemic might harm employee productivity. Especially during the early stages of the pandemic because employers had very limited time and experience to provide the necessary infrastructure to create a suitable work-from-home experience. In addition to that, the closing of schools and childcare facilities during national lockdowns meant that teleworkers also had to cope with the additional responsibilities of their children, which would lead to a drop in productivity (Lodovici et. al., 2021). Also, there was a tendency to procrastinate. Employees tend to delay working on their core tasks by spending time on non-work-related activities during working hours, such as using social media and having long breaks. (Wang et. al., 2021).

Organizations also have fewer possibilities to monitor their employees, resulting in lower individual work effort. Decreased control by colleagues or supervisors is an essential drawback of working from home. It is also difficult to monitor a worker's effort at home, especially when being interrupted by personal responsibilities and family members (Shareena and Shahid, 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home was a win-win scenario for both employees and employers. Nevertheless, in the current context working from home can no longer be regarded as an exclusive option for a minority of workers but an arrangement taken by all businesses and workers who do not require a physical workplace to continue with their jobs. During the pandemic, 81% of the worldwide workforce experienced partial or complete workplace closures. Many of them experienced working from home for the first time without training on how to work effectively from home (Savic, 2020). Previous research on working from home was from a context in which working from home was occasionally practiced by a limited number of employees and might be irrelevant in the pandemic situation. There could be significant differences between occasional WFH and WFH as a mandatory practice. There is a need to investigate how the pandemic has shaped the WFH experience, whether to implement WFH practices in the future and how to get the most out of it. Since Sri Lanka is a developing country, this paper will evaluate the psychological impact of working from home in a developing economy context where cultural and social conditions around employment are very different from those found in advanced economies.

METHODOLOGY

A total of ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in the IT industry to validate the concepts built using the literature review. The industry experts consisted of employees in different areas such as software development, quality assurance, business analysis, and head of the department/senior level. Their expert opinion on the experience of working from home during the pandemic was obtained.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Themes can be selected using an inductive or deductive approach. It is used to explore experiences, thoughts, or behaviors. The widely accepted framework for conducting a thematic analysis involves getting familiar

with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. It is a very flexible approach in analyzing qualitative data and is widely used by many researchers (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

Table 1: Industry experts interviewed

Code	Job role	Experience	Gender
A1	Tech Lead	10+ years	Male
A2	Software Engineer	2+ years	Female
A3	QA Engineer	5+ years	Male
A4	QA Engineer	2+ years	Female
A5	Business Consultant	8+ years	Female
A6	Associate Business Analyst	1 year	Male
A7	Lead Operation Engineer	10+ years	Male
A8	Director/ Head of Delivery	18+ years	Male
A9	Senior Systems Engineer	15+ years	Male
A10	Senior Tech Lead	12+ years	Female

The interviews focused on the psychological factors, the choice to work from home, job security, key challenges in working from home, sources of stress when working from home, advantages, and disadvantages of working from home, the strategies used to lessen the challenges of working from home, personal attributes needed to work from home effectively, problems in using IT facilities, work and family balance, team management, and team bonding, what is missed when working from home, company policy with regards to working from home and preference to work from home in the future.

Interview with A1: The industry expert A1 is a male Tech lead with more than ten years of experience in a leading global software company in the finance domain. He belongs to the 26-35 age group, is married, and has two children.

- The choice to work from home: Policy of the company. The company started the WFH policy even before the government imposed a lockdown.
- Job security: No impact
- Key challenges in working from home: No social interaction, Difficulty managing a team (challenging to identify non-verbal cues and body language), People can lie easily, Hard to understand a person's knowledge and level of understanding.
- Sources of stress: Additional responsibilities of children, Having the same routine and interacting with the same people every day. When there is lesser social interaction with people, there is a lesser preference to interact with people.
- Advantages: Time to travel and waking up and getting ready is saved which can be allocated for other work, have more time to spend with children, Have the flexibility to manage household work.
- Disadvantages: Working at an office is entirely different. Not good for established companies and more suitable for start-ups. There is no social interaction with colleagues at WFH. No time boundaries gradually lose the sense of time. People do not remember

when they start work and when they finish work. Work efficiency is also decreasing with time.

- Strategies taken to reduce the challenges: Exercise, overeating, higher junk food intake, better talking with other people who are outside of work, and having a drink with friends.
- Personal attributes: Time management, working according to a routine, outgoing, adaptable, resilient (managing COVID stress and other stresses).
- Problems in using IT facilities: VPN problems, cannot handle the load of the new users had to create new connections. Use of more internet when WFH. If there is a power cut, can inform the company of 'work disruption.' Cannot work course of weather conditions.
- Work and family balance: A committed place to work is there. However, there are distractions because of children. It is hard to ignore that children should allocate time for themselves; therefore, there are additional responsibilities.
- Team management and team bonding: Have not even seen some of the team members. Recently recruited ones have no loyalty towards the company, no idea about values, cannot use facilities, quickly changes job, senior employees are more attached to the companies. No team bonding. Hard to read their thoughts without reading their facial expressions. Difficult to decide by reading a chat. They can lie easily. Had virtual events but cannot count them.
- What is missed when working from home: Office facilities, colleagues, social interaction, informal chats, no tea breaks, the value of work gets reduced, and the motivation is diminished. The office environment is better for social development.
- Company policy regarding working from home: Company has a work-from-home policy. Can work from home as preferred.

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- Preference to work from home in the future: A hybrid working method is better, such as 60% from the office and 40% from home (three days at the office and two days at home). Permanently working from home is not good.

Interview with A2: The industry expert A2 is a female Software engineer with over two years of experience in a leading global enterprise software company. She belongs to the 26-35 age group and is unmarried.

- The choice to work from home: In the beginning, the government policy did not have a choice because of COVID. These days willingly work from home.
- Job security: No impact. The company assured that they would not lay off people.
- Key challenges in working from home: No proper communication, routine, and more distractions.
- Sources of stress: Issues in communicating, No proper routine.
- Advantages: Flexible. Can spend more time with family. Better to stay at home during the pandemic situation. Higher productivity. It saves time in travelling.
- Disadvantages: No 'office' experience. Cannot communicate properly (cannot see facial expressions or reactions). Cannot do higher studies because of overworking. Have become anxious and less confident. All the work done is not visible to the supervisor.
- Strategies taken to reduce the challenges: Having weekly team meetings, virtual games, fun competitions and challenges, and gifts sent by the company.
- Personal attributes: Should be energetic, a good team player, hardworking, committed and dedicated.
- Problems in using IT facilities: Mainly connection issues and power cuts. The company has provided all the IT facilities and compensates for the data charges.
- Work and family balance: There is a committed place to work; therefore, there are fewer distractions. Overworking leads to spending lesser time with family.

- Team management and team bonding: Barely gets to see and interact with the team.
- What is missed when working from home: Team bonding and office events
- Company policy regarding working from home: Company has a work-from-home policy. The policy is to work from home one day per month.
- Preference to work from home in the future: Physically go to the office about two days per week.

Interview with A3: The industry expert A3 is a male Quality assurance engineer with more than five years of experience. Currently, he is working in a Sri Lankan software company that provides services in the Credit Management industry. He belongs to the 26-35 age group and is unmarried.

- The choice to work from home: Both the government and workplace policy.
- Job security: Had an impact.
- Key challenges in working from home: Communication issues.
- Sources of stress: Issues in knowledge transfers.
- Advantages: Saves costs of transportation and accommodation for the employee. Saves operational costs for the company.
- Disadvantages: Issues in communication. Cannot directly reach out to a colleague when needed. If there is a problem with the hardware takes time to get it fixed.
- Strategies took to reduce the challenges: Talked to the leads about the problems encountered and asked for guidance from people with more experience.
- Personal attributes: Adaptable, Outgoing, Ability to move with a team quickly (team player), Supportive, Ability to read people.
- Problems in using IT facilities: Power cuts and internet issues. The company provides hardware. Disruptions can be informed to the company.

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- Work and family balance: There is a dedicated space to work; therefore, there are no disruptions. There are no disruptions from family, but there are minor disruptions from outside noises.
- Team management and team bonding: Depends on the attitude of the person. Should be friendly when dealing with the team.
- What is missed when working from home: It has more advantages than disadvantages. Work disruptions are the main problem faced.
- Company policy regarding working from home: Has worked from home before the pandemic but not for an extended period.
- Preference to work from home in the future: WFH is better, especially for the people who live out of Colombo, and should be continued.

Interview with A4: The industry expert A4 is a female Quality assurance engineer with more than two years of experience in a leading Sri Lankan-based software company. She belongs to the 26-35 age group, is married, and has no children.

- The choice to work from home: Initially, it was the workplace policy. Now can go to the office but feel safer working from home.
- Job security: Had an impact.
- Key challenges in working from home: Overworking. The supervisor cannot properly monitor the work. Hard to bond with the team members.
- Sources of stress: Issues in hardware.
- Advantages: Flexibility. Increase in productivity.
- Disadvantages: Overworking. Lesser work-life balance. There is no one to motivate when working, and it is challenging to reach out to a person to ask for help.

- Strategies took to reduce the challenges: Engage in hobbies. Have a daily informal meeting. Fun virtual events and gifts from the organization. Had to talk with family members to arrive at an understanding to lessen the disruptions.
- Personal attributes: Honesty, Self-control, Self-motivation, Friendly, Outgoing
- Problems in using IT facilities: Had to take a leave because of power cuts. Connection issues due to a slow connection when connecting through the VPN.
- Work and family balance: There is no proper work-life balance. Has become more committed to work. Initially, there was no proper place to work, but now there is a place.
- Team management and team bonding: Depends on the attitude of the person. Should be friendly when dealing with the team.
- What is missed when working from home: Knowledge sharing sessions. Cannot meet employees from different teams.
- Company policy with regards to working from home: No WFH policy.
- Preference to work from home in the future: Prefer to WFH in the future and going to the office once a week is enough. (80% WFH and 20% at the office) Even entirely, WFH is fine.

Interview with A5: The industry expert A5 is a female Business consultant with more than eight years of experience in a leading global software company in the finance domain. She belongs to the 26-35 age group, is married, and has children.

- The choice to work from home: Policy of the company. The company started the WFH policy even before the government imposed a lockdown. Currently, it is open for about 15% of the employees. However, feels safer to WFH.
- Job security: No impact
- Key challenges in working from home: No proper start at end times, issues in communication.

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- Sources of stress: Miscommunication. Cannot build a proper relationship with the client. Since the effort is not visible, there is lesser appreciation.
- Advantages: Have more time to spend with children.
- Disadvantages: No time boundaries. Need to spend a lot of effort and time when communicating with others. Having to look after children leads to additional stress. There is a lesser work-life balance. Have not seen some of the members of the team. Tend to be addicted to social media.
- Strategies taken to reduce the challenges include doing office work early in the morning before the children wake up. Separate devices are given for the children to do their schoolwork. Exercising. Had virtual well-being challenges, team meetings, catch-ups with the supervisor, and events organized by the company.
- Personal attributes: Have a proper timetable. Give priority to tasks. Delegate the work effectively. Resilient (ability to handle stress well). Outgoing personality.
- Problems in using IT facilities: Internet issues and power cuts.
- Work and family balance: Distractions are there because children need to spend time with their parents even while working.
- Team management and team bonding: Some people should be micromanaged, and their productivity is low. Some people prefer to do office work at night, and others do not work when they WFH. Because of the work, there is no time to guide the interns.
- What is missed when working from home: Having the chance to work without disturbances, a proper working environment, and company events.
- Company policy regarding working from home: Company has a work-from-home policy. Can work from home as preferred.
- Preference to work from home in the future: A hybrid working method is better since the proper infrastructure is available at home. (3 days from the office and 2 days from home)

Interview with A6: The industry expert A6 is a male Associate business analyst with more than 1 year of experience in a leading global company in the healthcare domain. He belongs to the 18-25 age group and is not married.

- The choice to work from home: This was both government and company policy.
- Job security: Had an impact.
- Key challenges in working from home: Need to be responsive and available all the time.
- Sources of stress: Miscommunication issues. It takes time to learn about the company. Hard to drive lengthy discussions in knowledge-sharing sessions.
- Advantages: Not mentioned.
- Disadvantages: No proper communication. No visibility to the supervisor. No chance to bond with the team. Lesser motivation.
- Strategies took to reduce the challenges: Sessions on getting to know others in the company. Fellowship meetings after a sprint.
- Personal attributes: Outgoing, energetic, effective communication (to the point), skill to judge people
- Problems in using IT facilities: Internet issues, power cuts, hardware issues
- Work and family balance: Distractions are there from family, and there is no proper place to work.
- Team management and team bonding: Missing face-to-face interaction with team members.
- What is missed when working from home: Opportunities to grow in career, the opportunity to network, team bonding, supervisors' guidance, having the lesser motivation to work, learning from others
- Company policy regarding working from home: Company does not have a work-from-home policy.

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- Preference to work from home in the future: A hybrid working method. It is easier for senior employees to adapt to remote WFH than someone with lesser working experience.

Interview with A7: The industry expert A7 is a male Lead operation engineer with more than ten years of experience in a leading Sri Lankan software company that provides travel software solutions. He belongs to the 36-45 age group, is married, and has children.

- The choice to work from home: It was the government policy.
- Job security: No impact.
- Key challenges in working from home: Data problems and power failures. No proper bond with the team.
- Sources of stress: Team members have been unavailable at times.
- Advantages: Time to travel is saved. It is a cost-saving for both the company and the employee.
- Disadvantages: Cannot bond with the team, have lost the chance of face-to-face communication, and cannot identify facial expressions. Communication issues. Should have a proper environment with electricity, an internet connection, and a laptop.
- Strategies took to reduce the challenges: Have an ongoing call with the team members throughout the day. Start work early and balance it with other personal commitments. Have casual conversations with the team.
- Personal attributes: Be honest. Good attitudes. Should provide support to the members as a leader.
- Problems in using IT facilities: Internet issues and power cuts
- Work and family balance: Wake up early, start work and manage other household commitments while working.
- Team management and team bonding: Missing face-to-face interaction with team members and other teams.

- What is missed when working from home: Difficult to bond with other teams.
- Company policy regarding working from home: Company does not have a work-from-home policy.
- Preference to work from home in the future: WFH is better because it saves time to travel and can manage personal commitments. It is also beneficial for the company because it is cost-saving. (Bring half of the employees to the office for a week and allow them to WFH in the next week)

Interview with A8: The industry expert A8 is a male Head of delivery/Director with more than 18 years of experience in a leading US-based software company. He belongs to the 46-55 age group, is married, and has children.

- The choice to work from home: It was the company policy. Must get permission to visit the office.
- Job security: No impact.
- Key challenges in working from home: Difficult to track the effective utilization of the team members. Hard to connect with the team. Difficulties in managing the home environment.
- Sources of stress: There is a hectic schedule because of back-to-back meetings and overworking.
- Advantages: Saves travel time which can be used in more productive work. Saves money.
- Disadvantages: Additional stress and hectic work schedule. Not an effective method when it comes to certain people.
- Strategies taken to reduce the challenges: Proper time management, frequent updates with the team, and virtual events organized by the company.
- Personal attributes: Honesty. Being ethical. Time management.
- Problems in using IT facilities: Internet issues and hardware logistic issues.

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- Work and family balance: Have a separate place to work, but sometimes there are interruptions from children.
- Team management and team bonding: Not having the chance to connect with the team directly.
- What is missed when working from home: Not engaging with people and other activities organized by the company.
- Company policy regarding working from home: Company does not have a work-from-home policy.
- Preference to work from home in the future: Should have a flexible policy based on the team's needs.

Interview with A9: The industry expert A9 is a male senior Systems engineer with over 15 years of experience in a Sri Lankan software company that provides travel software. He belongs to the 36-45 age group, is married, and has children.

- The choice to work from home: It was the company policy. These days, an employee must inform their direct supervisor before visiting the office.
- Job security: No impact.
- Key challenges in working from home: Getting help from people to solve a problem.
- Sources of stress: Must work for a longer time.
- Advantages: Can spend more time with family.
- Disadvantages: Cannot feel the emotions of the people.
- Strategies took to reduce the challenges: Have frequent calls with the members. Should have proper escalation mechanisms. Engage in hobbies and virtual events organized by the company.
- Personal attributes: Honesty, team player, be fair.
- Problems in using IT facilities: No issues encountered.

- Work and family balance: Has improved and gets to spend more time with family members.
- Team management and team bonding: Hard to read their emotions.
- What is missed when working from home: Nothing.
- Company policy with regards to working from home: No policy. However, employees can work from home during the night shift.
- Preference to work from home in the future: WFH should have a more significant portion. Should go to the office to avoid problems. (Either four days from home and one day from the office or three days from home and two days at the office)

Interview with A10: The industry expert A10 is a female Senior tech lead with over 12 years of experience in a leading US-based software company. She belongs to the 36-45 age group, is married, and has children.

- The choice to work from home: Because of both the government and the company policy. Even currently must get permission before visiting the office.
- Job security: This was a concern initially.
- Key challenges in working from home: Balancing both work and responsibilities of children.
- Sources of stress: Less visibility about people need to follow up constantly. Communication and technical difficulties.
- Advantages: Saves time in commuting to work. Can spend more time with children and on personal well-being. Cost-saving.
- Disadvantages: Issues in communication. Lesser visibility. Productive time is spent trying to communicate.
- Strategies took to reduce the challenges: Properly track the team's work and have constant sync-up calls.

- Personal attributes: Proper planning. Being responsible. Self-discipline. Positive attitude and mindset. Good communication. Team player. Being responsive. Respectful.
- Problems in using IT facilities: Hardware issues. Network issues and power cuts.
- Work and family balance: Has a positive impact. Can spend more time with the children and attend to their work.
- Team management and team bonding: Have to follow up constantly—difficulties in reading people.
- What is missed when working from home: Not having enough engagement with the team members.
- Company policy with regards to working from home: No policy.
- Preference to work from home in the future: Flexible policy where employees can work from home if they prefer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the thematic analysis, several themes such as psychological factors (Work-related stress, Stress related to COVID-19, Depression, Anxiety, Loneliness, Professional isolation, Health & well-being, Exhaustion, Work-life balance, and Work productivity), the choice to work from home, job security, key challenges in working from home, sources of stress when working from home, advantages, and disadvantages of working from home, the strategies used to lessen the challenges of working from home, personal attributes needed to work from home effectively, problems in using IT facilities, work and family balance, team management, and team bonding, what is missed when working from home, company policy with regards to working from home and preference to work from home in the future were identified. The interviewees mentioned personal attributes such as proper time management, working according to a routine, being outgoing, adaptable, resilient, energetic, being a good team player, being hardworking, dedicated/committed, being supportive, honest, having self-

control, self-motivation, friendly, effective communicator, skill to judge people, good attitude, being ethical, responsible, and responsive. Another critical factor mentioned is the work-from-home environment. The interviewees mentioned factors such as having a committed place to work, managing additional family responsibilities, and distractions, and facing network connectivity issues, hardware issues, and power cuts. Next, the interviewees mentioned having the same daily routine, not having a proper daily routine, communication difficulties, overworking, lack of resources, and job security as sources of additional stress. The interviewees also mentioned WFH challenges such as difficulty in team management, problems in identifying non-verbal cues and body language, difficulty in understanding people, difficulty in getting a proper response from people, more distractions, cannot focus on higher studies, issues in knowledge transfers, difficult to monitor people, hard to build meaningful relationships with clients and miscommunication issues. The interviewees mentioned that strategies such as exercising, casual meetings with colleagues, virtual games and events organized by the organization, taking guidance from experienced employees, engaging in hobbies, starting work early in the morning, having multiple devices for each user, blocking the calendar to focus on work, constantly check up on the team and support and benefits from the organization helps to lessen the challenges in WFH. Several studies support the findings of the current study. As per the social isolation survey conducted by (Ward and Shabha, 2001), it was revealed that remote working employees require ‘social interaction.’ The current study also confirms the finding of this study. One of the interviewees stated that one of the key challenges in WFH is not having proper social interaction. The study done by (Bentley et. al., 2006) focused on how perceived organizational social support influences teleworker well-being and the results indicate a negative relationship with psychological strain. The finding made by (Bentley et. al., 2006) was confirmed in the current study. The interviewees of the current study stated that the support they receive from the organization,

such as having virtual events, supervisor's support, casual chats, and receiving tokens of appreciation, help lessen the key challenges they face when working from home during the pandemic. The study done by (Nakrošienė et. al., 2019) reveals that having a proper place to work when working from home strengthens telework outcomes: overall satisfaction with telework, perceived advantages of teleworking, career opportunities, and increases self-reported productivity. The interviewees of the current study confirmed these factors by stating that having a committed place to work with lesser distractions leads to a work-family balance and increased productivity. The study done by (Nakrošienė et. al., 2019) reveals a reduced time for communication when working from home, leading to higher productivity. This finding contradicts the current study where interviewees revealed many communication issues and miscommunications when working from home, and productive time is wasted on trying to communicate with others. The current study confirms the findings of (Palumbo, 2020; Bellmann and Hübler, 2021), which states that working from home negatively affects the employee's work-life balance and increases exhaustion. A study done in Egypt (Mostafa, 2021) during the pandemic revealed that employees feel more exhausted when working remotely. It is again confirmed from the current study where the interviewees stated that they tend to overwork, have lost a sense of time, and feel as if they should be available every time. The study done by (Wong, Cheung, and Chen, 2021) related to WFH effectiveness and the preference for WFH after the pandemic confirms the current study's findings, where all the interviewees stated that they prefer to have a hybrid method of working after the pandemic where a more significant portion of work should be done from home. The study by (Prasad, Vaidya and Mangipudi, 2020) conducted in the IT sector in Hyderabad during the COVID-19, which is related to psychological well-being, reveals that remote working was a challenge due to isolation, family disturbances, and overworking. These factors were confirmed in the current study where the interviewees stated that they feel more

professionally isolated when working from home, there are disruptions because of family members, children, and outside noises, and lesser work-life balance due to overworking. The study done by (Afonso, Fonseca and Teodoro, 2021) regarding anxiety, depression, and sleep quality of full-time teleworkers during the pandemic revealed that the considered sample had significant levels of anxiety and depression levels. The current study revealed that 24.4% of the participants were in the borderline abnormal category and 12.5% in the abnormal category for depression, but all the participants were in the normal category regarding anxiety. The current study has a more prominent score for depression because employees are tired of monotonous routine. However, the anxiety level is low because employees are more used to the uncertainty of the pandemic. A study done in Sri Lanka during the pandemic's early stages revealed a significant positive relationship between telecommuting and work-life balance (Uresha, 2020). However, the data analysis of the current study has revealed that when employees have worked from home for a longer time, there is a significant negative relationship between work-life balance. The study by (Xiao et. al., 2021; Schifano, Clark, Greiff, Vögele, and D'Ambrosio, 2021) revealed that the physical well-being of teleworkers has decreased during the pandemic. The current study also supports this where the participants described that they tend to overeat and eat more junk food, while others stated that they started to exercise to mitigate the impact. When it comes to productivity, the study done by (Sutarto et. al., 2021) reported an increase, which supports the current study's findings. In addition to that, the current study reveals that the productivity level changes with gender, with males reporting higher productivity. The same study by (Sutarto et. al., 2021) revealed that unmarried respondents have a higher level of depression and anxiety. This result supports the current study regarding depression, where 72.22% of the married respondents had a normal depression level while only 59.50% of the unmarried respondents had a normal level of depression. The study by (Ridic, Avdibegovic, and Busatlic, 2016)

revealed that remote work does not impact work-life balance regarding gender, age group, and presence of children. All these findings support the current study, but the participants showed a difference in professional isolation and productivity with gender.

CONCLUSION

The change in the method of working in Sri Lanka will continue to be there in the future. Also, it is evident from the current research that employees prefer a hybrid method of working. If the companies in Sri Lanka do not already have a WFH policy, it should be implemented. WFH is an excellent method to attract more women into the workforce. It is also good because male parents can spend more time with their children and help with childcare responsibilities. Companies can attract skilled employees, reduce costs, and increase productivity. The support received by the employees when working from home such as providing the necessary equipment and technology, compensating for their additional costs, having activities focusing on well-being and team bonding, sending tokens of appreciation, allowing 'work disruption' if there is an interruption such as a power cut are some of the strategies that the companies can follow. Also, proper technology should be used to track the employees' working hours, or else they feel guilty and tend to overwork. Proper knowledge transfer methods should be implemented, especially for newly recruited employees, and ensure they do not feel left out of work. Having training videos and materials and having a mentor to guide the newly recruited employees initially are some methods that can be used. To further refine the practice of WFH, the organization can design a code of conduct specifically for WFH. The continuous guidance of the supervisor is essential for the employees when working from home. The employees should maintain a proper work schedule, prioritize their tasks, and have clear boundaries between work and life. If there are known disruptions to happen during the daytime, the employees can use strategies to avoid the disruption, such as waking up early to start work, charging the devices if there's going

to be a power cut, and managing life commitments and work. WFH method is one of the solutions for the ongoing fuel crisis in Sri Lanka as well.

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