



# SOLVING THE WORK-FROM-HOME CONUNDRUM

## A personae-based framework for HR policymaking.

By Snehal Shah and Vineeta Dwivedi

The prolonged lockdown across countries due to the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a very real shift towards a new Work-from-Home (WFH) culture for the global workforce. Homes have become the new conference rooms, virtual backgrounds are the new office artefacts, and workplace chatter is now peppered with new lingo like ‘digital hand’, ‘breakout rooms’, and ‘virtual happy hours’.

The number of people who now WFH is staggering. According to Gallup Panel data, the percentage of employed adults in the U.S. working from home rose from 31 percent in mid-March 2020 to 49 percent a few days later, and to 59 percent the week after that.<sup>1</sup> The extent of remote work levelled off at 62 percent in mid-April 2020.<sup>2</sup>

‘The 2020 State of Remote Work’, a survey conducted by Buffer involving 3,500 remote workers from around the world, concluded that respondents almost unanimously wanted to continue working remotely (at least for some of the time) for the rest of their working life.<sup>3</sup> In our data-gathering exercise, we found that a C-suite executive, who would usually be on a plane 10 days a month and often keep 15-hour workday schedules, suddenly found himself and his leadership team more productive, less distracted by other commitments, and more focused on strategic priorities. In another instance, an academic reported that she found more quality time to work on research and prepare for online classes while working from home. An Information Technology (IT) helpdesk employee providing technology support to a global team echoed similar sentiments.

At the same time, an increasing number of news reports are suggesting that WFH would now be in effect until the summer of 2021 at least.<sup>4</sup>

Seen in this light, how can working from home become a win-win situation for both employers and employees? What are the long-term policies that organisations can implement to make WFH an enduring work practice that benefits both parties?

### Developing WFH policies

Physical support ecosystems and the search for meaning and purpose in work are important and complementary constituents of employee well-being. Ensuring this will require long-term policies that are inclusive and take care of employee well-being while generating productivity gains. Hence, when making policy decisions about WFH, organisations will have to strike a balance between looking after employee well-being and achieving productivity and growth goals.

While organisations often want to support WFH initiatives, they may be unsure of how to go about it. In most cases, they end up creating a standard policy that applies to all employees

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without taking into account their specific needs (refer to Box 1 in Figure 1). Some large firms have a huge amount of data on their employees, but struggle to organise their WFH arrangements in a coherent manner so as to develop a fair and transparent policy.

There are some instances—such as Indian IT services companies Infosys and Tech Mahindra—which are already using data to decide which staff will WFH or return to office.<sup>5</sup> In making their decision, these companies considered various criteria, such as project-specific resource allocation, employees' health assessment, and productivity parameters. In our view, this approach is overly organisation-centric.

In contrast, we propose a comprehensive framework below that can help organisations develop an actionable WFH policy, which ensures employee well-being while maximising productivity (refer to Box 3 in Figure 1).

### Developing WFH personae

We propose that organisations adopt a customised approach by developing a set of 'WFH Personae'. A 'persona' refers to a collation of information on a group of customers that includes their aspirations, dreams, problems and challenges,

background information, and environmental characteristics.<sup>6</sup> This is a concept popularised in the marketing domain, whereby market research insights help the marketer to create an imaginary archetype of a typical user profile.

In our case, the customer is the employee and the marketer is the employer. Employers can categorise their employees under different personae based on how well they fit the characteristics of a persona.

### WFH PERSONAE DIMENSIONS

Below are some criteria that can be used by organisations, large or small, to develop their own WFH personae. The criteria cover nine dimensions specific to the needs and preferences of individuals and their employers.

1. Nature of role/project in WFH terms: Customer facing, operational, administrative, strategic. In other words, WFH-friendly, moderately WFH-friendly, and non-WFH-friendly.
2. Distance from work: Divided into bands, e.g., shorter than 5 km, from 5 to 10 km, from 10 to 15 km, and so on.
3. Mode of travel: Private car (self-driven/chauffeured), public transport (such as train, tram, metro, and bus), walking, etc.

4. Technology infrastructure: Internet connection bandwidth, number of Internet providers in the area, city status with respect to broadband connectivity, stability of power supply, etc.
5. Health considerations: Risk of falling ill from Covid-19.
6. Home environment: Nuclear or extended family, presence of elderly and children, option for staff to have an office space at home, etc.
7. Support environment: Availability of a caregiver, domestic help, day-care facility, etc.
8. Employee preference: Employees' preference on whether to work from office or home, and psychological indicators that capture their emotions, hope, and state of mind.<sup>7</sup>
9. Organisational preference: Overall assessment by the organisation, including performance criteria.

The criteria mentioned above can be collated to create an index, which in turn can define three unique personae classified as high, medium, or low WFH potential personae.

### HIGH WFH POTENTIAL PERSONA

Its features may include WFH-friendly roles, employees' preference for WFH, high presence of supportive technology infrastructure ('hard' factors) and supportive home environment ('soft' aspects), as well as employers' preference for WFH.

Steven Chong is a Singapore-based computer engineer who works for a US-based software company under the WFH arrangement. Being a night owl, he now has the flexibility to align his working hours closer to those of his colleagues in the New York HQ, as Singapore is 12 hours ahead of New York. The applications and tools Steven needs for his job are already installed on his computer. He can attend most of his meetings before his daughter Alice is awake and ready to go to school. With the WFH routine, he is able to drop her off at school, relieving the morning stress for his wife who is a paediatric nurse at a local hospital. Steven usually wakes up in the afternoon, just in time to receive Alice when she comes back from school. He typically spends some time with her before putting her to bed for an afternoon nap. After finishing some household chores and having an early dinner with his family, he eases back to another workday synced with U.S. timing.

### MEDIUM WFH POTENTIAL PERSONA

Its features may include roles that are moderately WFH-friendly, employees' neutrality towards WFH, moderate presence of supportive technology infrastructure ('hard' factors), and moderately supportive home environment ('soft' aspects), as well as employers' neutrality towards WFH.

Sakina is an interior designer working for a top Dubai-based infrastructure development firm. She is often assigned to work on high-end residential and office designs that the firm sells to high net worth individuals from around the world. The mother of a two-year old, she typically has a long commute to work. While she is adept at her job, she would prefer not to spend long hours away from home, which had prompted her to once express a desire to quit her job. With WFH becoming an acceptable way of life, she requested for a flexible option where all her client meetings and site visits are to be held only on Mondays and Wednesdays. These are the two days when her mother comes over to babysit her child. Sakina's firm values her creativity and is happy that it is able to retain her. In return, Sakina ensures that she makes herself available to attend all video calls that have been scheduled over these two days, and also adheres to project deadlines.



### LOW WFH POTENTIAL PERSONA

Its features may include non-WFH-friendly roles, employees' low preference levels for WFH, low presence of supportive technology infrastructure ('hard' factors), and unsupportive home environment ('soft' aspects), as well as employers' low preference levels for WFH.





Kumar is the duty manager at one of the top luxury hotel groups in India. His job requires him to be present on the hotel premises during duty hours to look after the needs of the guests and ensure the smooth functioning of the hotel operations. He is trained to solve problems quickly and efficiently, ensuring a superlative guest experience as promised in the hotel's brochures. Kumar lives with his extended family, which includes an ailing father. He is the sole breadwinner of the family and cannot afford to lose his job during this difficult economic period. Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, the inflow of guests has become a trickle. However, Kumar diligently goes to work every day, proud to serve doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers from the nearby speciality hospital who have made the hotel their temporary home during this period.



The above personae framework offers an objective way of making sense of the WFH phenomenon, allowing management to avoid relying on the arbitrariness of a blanket policy, or resorting to knee-jerk reactions to develop a policy that may be limited in its approach. It helps the organisation to design a customised HR policy that offers a better person-job-organisation fit to ensure better productivity.

Our framework includes multiple criteria for decision-making that incorporates 'softer' aspects of employees' context, such as a supportive environment, preferences, and well-being considerations. Such data are typically not found in corporate databases. Organisations thus have to go the extra mile to ascertain these critical intangibles that determine employee well-being. Moreover, by tapping on the physical and psychographic information of employees, the personae framework facilitates the collation and categorisation of data to provide a systematic actionable structure for HR policymaking, rather than limiting itself to strictly data analysis. This way, the policy is more holistic in its approach.

### Challenges in implementation: Three-dimensional interdependent context

While decision-makers can use the personae to draw up a customised WFH policy, a broader perspective needs to be considered. This is because these personae are embedded in an interdependent contextual web that includes job characteristics, industry type, and geographical/cultural differences.

#### JOB CHARACTERISTICS

A 2018 study found that WFH improved performance for three types of employees: those with complex jobs, those who did not need others to do their job, and those who had low levels of interaction when in the office.<sup>8</sup> The researchers did not find any types of jobs where working remotely led to a decline in employees' performance. But the WFH option is not for everyone. Blue-collar jobs, as well as customer-facing, project-based, and client relationship-focused jobs, are less suited to the WFH format.

#### INDUSTRY TYPE

Not all industries can adopt the above WFH model with the same degree of success. While it fits well with, say, some services industries, it is harder to implement in industries that need a physical location or a presence. The LinkedIn Workforce Confidence Index in May 2020 showed that 55 percent of respondents thought that their industry could be effective when people were working remotely. Fields conducive for digital work, such as software, finance, and media, saw more than 75 percent of people endorse the idea that remote work and effective operations go hand in hand. However, in sectors like healthcare (48 percent), manufacturing (41 percent), and retail (29 percent), there was more resistance.<sup>9</sup>

#### GEOGRAPHICAL/CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Similarly, not all cultures approach work in the same way, so variations in preferences from country to country are inevitable. According to Polycom's 2017 study involving 24,000 respondents across 12 countries, 80 percent

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of Brazilian employees were comfortable working anywhere. However, in Japan, only 35 percent of companies offered any form of flexible working. The same study also discovered that more than two-thirds of Russian and Indian respondents said their biggest concern was being perceived as less hardworking if they adopted the WFH practice.<sup>10</sup>

#### Implications for decision-makers

Decision-makers need to appreciate that WFH is not for everyone, and a one-size-fits-all policy attempted by some organisations may not work. On the other hand, personae-based understanding of employee clusters can generate a customised approach to WFH policies that is likely to yield a better employee-job-organisation fit, leading to positive outcomes.

The criteria for personae-based decision-making include 'hard' employee data, such as job characteristics, distance from work, and performance yardsticks, as well as 'softer' aspects of employee psychographics. This combination is likely to yield effective outcomes for both the organisation and the employee. These personae frameworks need to be embedded in a macro context, which takes into account the nature of the industry and region-specific nuances. Such a holistic approach helps organisations devise a comprehensive WFH policy that brings long-term benefits.

The personae framework also gives organisations an important policy lever to demonstrate transparency and fairness, thereby showing that policymaking is an objective, well-reasoned exercise. However, it should be noted that personae-based policymaking is neither foolproof nor exhaustive. On the one hand, there might be employees whose profile may not fit the personae drawn up. On the other hand, some employees' characteristics could be too

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sophisticated, such that they fit more than one profile. When such situations arise, the organisation's culture and values can guide decision-makers to make a better, considered decision.

The current pandemic may not have many upsides, but the WFH debate has definitely received a fillip because of it. Organisations can take advantage of this crisis to develop an equitable, fair, and long-term WFH solution, based on the personae framework that keeps employee well-being in mind while optimising performance. With robust technology, where real-time connectedness is only a touch of a button away, working from home is no longer a special arrangement like it once was before the pandemic.

#### Snehal Shah

is Professor of Organisation Behaviour, Chairperson of the Fellow Programme in Management and Head of Research at S.P. Jain Institute of Management and Research, India

#### Vineeta Dwivedi

teaches Business Communication at S.P. Jain Institute of Management and Research, India

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