

# Workplace Flexibility in the Post Covid-19 Era: Teleworking, the New Normal

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## Abstract

The evolving nature of work, workforce and environment is the driving force behind the need for more innovative and effective work arrangements in all facets of the economy. Making the work environment more flexible provides workers with what they need to manage both their lives and their jobs which leads to higher productivity. Before the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, workplace flexibility had garnered much attention, fundamentally as a workplace incentive for attracting and retaining talent. Presently, the Covid-19 pandemic has altered flexibility from a mere desirable perquisite to a very influential corporate practice that is expected to endure well after the pandemic. As the number of coronavirus cases increase and more employers commit to the physical-distancing practices that health officials say will help slow the rapid spread of Covid-19, by closure of schools, offices etc. workplace flexibility has become a real-time global innovation. Firms have been made to introduce telework (also known as telecommuting or working from “home”), a form of workplace flexibility on a large scale. Teleworking is the process of working from home with the use of internet, e-mail and telephone or any workable electronic gadget. It is the belief of many scholars and authors that with the aid of digitalization and technological innovation, teleworking has laid to rest some concerns such as there being so few jobs that can be done from home and the fear of lack of control over people. This paper sought to find out the extent the above assertions are true. It equally sought to appraise the effects of teleworking on organizational performance, challenges organizations face as a result of imbibing teleworking. A multi-level teleworking framework, rooted on Socio-technical systems (STS) theory, which looks into the part played by personnel, technical as well as organizational factors and their interplay in telework execution and outcome was used as the theoretical framework of this paper. In-depth library research anchored on analytical discussion was adopted as the methodology for this investigation. The review were analysed in line with the objectives of the study. Finally the investigation made recommendations on the efficacy of teleworking as a trend that can be taken as a new normal without exemption.

**Keywords:** Workplace flexibility; Covid 19 pandemic; Teleworking; Socio-technical systems (STS); Theory.

## 1. Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic did not only suddenly interrupt normal work routines worldwide, especially when government authorities decided to restrict the movements of the population and commercial activities through lockdown in order to contain the coronavirus, it also caused an acceleration of work trends such as workplace flexibility that were already underway involving the migration of work to online or virtual environments. *Kossek et al. (2014)* define workplace flexibility as a mutually beneficial arrangement between employees and employers in which both parties agree on when, where and how the employees will work to meet the organization's needs. Workplace flexibility can be either formal and officially approved through HR policies, or informal and available on a discretionary basis. It may include such alternative work arrangements such as flexitime, teleworking, leaves and part-time work.

When the infection rates started to increase in March of 2020, most organizations had no choice but to ask their employees to embrace teleworking, a form of workplace flexibility, by working remotely. Working remotely is a deviation from the regular, nine-to-five o'clock, office-bound model known to traditional organisations (*Odutola, 2020*). The new normal was accelerated and facilitated by the rise of connectivity and communication technologies. Teleworking (also known as telecommuting or work-from-home), according to *Bloom et al. (2015)*, is becoming an increasingly common practice and literally connotes the process of working from home with the use of internet, e-mail and telephone (*Odutola, 2020*). It was used by many companies and public structures to ensure the continuation of business at a distance despite the lockdown in order to avert social and economic crises (*Dolce et al., 2020*). Some scholars and professionals have noted that the telework experienced during and after the Covid-19 crisis and containment period has repealed some of the most frequently heard concerns (which include the belief that there are only a few jobs that can be done from home, the fear of lack of control over people, and so on), and that this was

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made achievable by enhancing digitalization and technological innovations (Dolce *et al.*, 2020; Kniffin *et al.*, 2021; Rudolph *et al.*, 2020).

The main objective of this paper is to examine the extent the assertion that teleworking has repealed some of the most frequently heard concerns is true. The specific objectives include to: appraise the effects of teleworking on organizational performance, outline the challenges faced by organizations as a result of imbibing teleworking and finally make recommendations on the efficacy of teleworking as a trend that can be taken as a new normal in workplaces.

## 2. Teleworking: A Conceptual Evaluation

According to Mamaghani (2012), teleworking is a workplace flexibility practice where employees work from remote locations using technology devices. According to Green *et al.* (2017), many terms have been used to describe teleworking, including telecommuting, home working, anywhere working, e-work, distributed work arrangements, virtual work and mobile work. Telework in France (and applicable generally), refers to the organizational practice where any form of work which could have been performed within the employer's / organization's premises is done by an employee outside these premises on a voluntary basis with the aid of information and communication technologies Article L. 1222-9 of the Labour Code. Furthermore, while in principle, telework must be voluntary and cannot be imposed on the employee, Article L. 1222-11 of the Labour Code states that in unusual circumstances, such as the threat of an epidemic, or in cases of force majeure, the execution of telework may be considered as a work place adjustment made necessary to allow the continuity of the company's activity and to guarantee the protection of employees. In situations like these, it is pertinent to note that the application of telework is within the power of the employer and may be imposed on the employees.

In a bid to ensure that there is a systemic perspective of the teleworking situation, the International Labour Organization ILO (2017) came up with different modalities of teleworking which include: a). regular home-based telework (which refers to employees working from home regularly, using Information Communication Technology (ICT)); b). high mobile telework (involving employees working in numerous places regularly, resulting in a high level of mobility and ICT usage); and, c). occasional telework (consisting of employees working occasionally in one or more places outside the employer's premises with a much-reduced degree of mobility than the high mobile group) (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020; Messenger and Gschwind, 2016). Table 1 shows the adapted definitions for these types of telework.

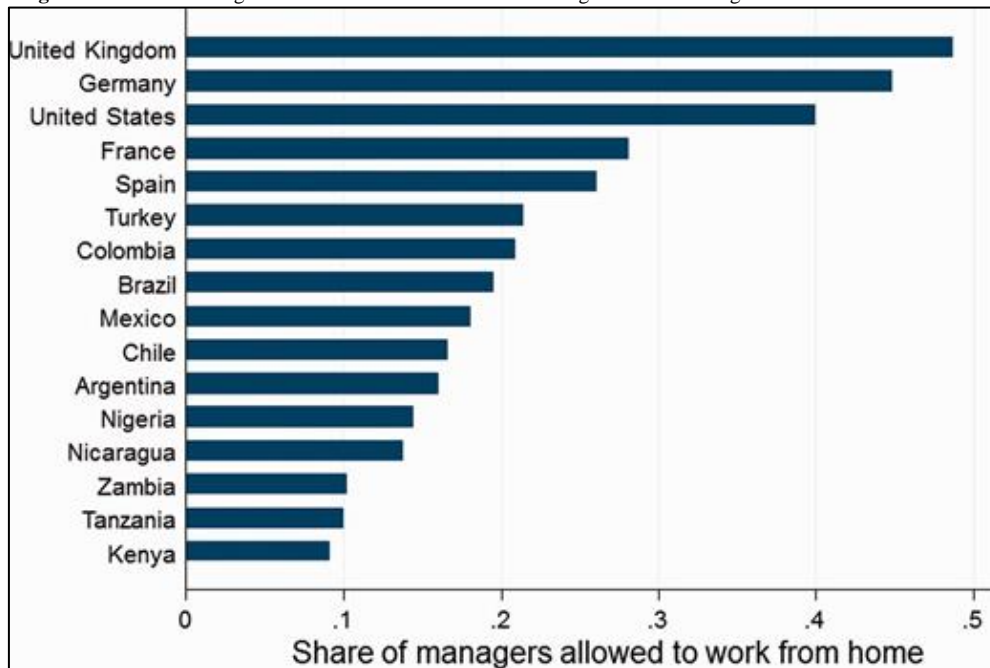
Table-1. Types of Telework

Modality	Use of Technology	Location
Regular home-based telework	Always or almost all the time	Working from home several times in a month or in other remote locations less often than several times a month.
High mobile tele work	Always or almost all the time	Working at least several times a week in at least two locations other than the employer's/organization's premises or working daily in at least one other location.
Occasional telework	Always or almost all the time	Less frequently and/or fewer locations than high mobile group.

Source: Adapted from Euro found and the International Labour Organization ILO (2017) and Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés (2020).

Green *et al.* (2017), cited quite a number of personal reasons both for adopting and not adopting telework. Those for adopting teleworking include: reduction in commuting (Maruyama and Tietze, 2012), enabling flexible scheduling (Bentley and Pak, 2000), helping to manage family commitments (Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2013), enhancing control over the working environment (Maruyama and Tietze, 2012), and facilitating a quiet work environment as well as improving productivity (Wilton *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, Barbuto *et al.* (2020) highlighted some benefits of teleworking acknowledged by both organizations and workers to include reducing economic costs associated with "home-work-home" travelling, saving time, and planning work autonomously. Essentially, this created avenues for employees to be creative, independent, autonomous, and the leverage to attain self-esteem and self-actualization in human motivation processes. On the other hand, personal reasons for not adopting telework include but not limited to the need for information sharing with others (Bentley and Pak, 2000), the feeling of being more productive at the office and the need for socialisation with colleagues (Wilton *et al.*, 2011). Molino *et al.* (2020) on their part pointed out techno stress as a significant negative consequence of teleworking on workers' well-being. The implication here refers to socially endowed and motivated personnel who enjoy team-work, meeting people, face-to-face interaction, taking orders from supervisors etc. Those with techno stress and socially imbued motivation may likely experience mental and physical hazards and constraints.

Internationally, teleworking is quite common and not new. Figure 1 is from a telephone survey, ran on over 3,000 medium-sized (50–5,000 employees) manufacturing firms between 2012–2013 by Bloom *et al.* (2015). It shows the share of managers allowed to work from home during normal working hours in different countries.

**Figure-1.** Share of Managers Allowed to Work from Home during Normal Working Hours in Different Countries

Source: Bloom *et al.* (2015)

The findings show that a considerable number of managers in the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, almost 50%, is allowed to telework during normal hours indicating that this is a conventional practice. For many developing countries, though, it is still relatively surprisingly high, at 10% or 20%. This, according to Bloom *et al.* (2015) survey respondents, is mainly because teleworking for developing countries is becoming increasingly common due to rising traffic congestion and the spread of laptops and cell-phone connectivity. The issues of medical / health (pandemic for instance), harsh economic environments, family constraints etc. were not considered and this is a draw back to the results of the survey.

## 2.1. Factors Affecting Teleworking

Morikawa (2020) conducted an interview survey of full-time employees and executives at RIETI, an economic research institute in Japan about their productivity at home and from their qualitative comments the survey came up with these four major factors affecting teleworking productivity.

1. Many people emphasized on the lack of user friendly soft and hard wares used to gain remote access to the office IT system from home. This, they claimed, is attributable to effects of switching from different keyboards and a lack of experience in using the software.
2. There are some tasks that must be conducted in the office, in most cases, for security reasons and as such many employees commented that they separated tasks conducted in the office from those at home for this reason. In view of this, they noted that full teleworking (i.e., five days a week) may reduce overall organizational productivity/ performance considerably.
3. Some people emphasised on the loss of the valuable, prompt communication that is readily obtainable only through face-to-face interactions with their colleagues. This is consistent with the result in Battiston *et al.* (2017). Additionally, in line with the opinions of Mogilner *et al.* (2018), that high-quality social interactions such as informal chats amongst co-workers are necessary for optimal mental and physical health, any plans to reduce the volume of people in workplaces in support of teleworking is believed by Brooks *et al.* (2020) to vary and likely have side effects that will harm individuals' mental and physical health to a certain degree.
4. Poor working environment in most homes, particularly, the unavailability of a private room specifically designed for work poses a serious constraint on teleworking for many people. Furthermore, some people stated that the presence of small children makes it seemingly difficult to efficiently work at home.

Furthermore, according to Ramarajan and Reid (2013), employees often find it challenging to maintain boundaries between work and non-work issues and the forced confinement of workers during the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the issue. While teleworking might seem very appealing as it offers a safe harbour, the absence of separation between one's work and home and the lack of commutes to provide a transition between the two domains creates a work-life imbalance and can equally become a burden. For instance, working from home faces many distractions especially to a sociable individual who may have flocks of friends. Again, commutes from office to home create transition and relaxation between the two domains. In another vein, Bhave *et al.* (2020) averred that even before the Covid-19 pandemic, employers were developing and adopting technologies to enable them monitor employees' whereabouts (e.g. with sociometric sensors). Although managing-by-walking-around is not feasible with people working remotely, the rapidly expanded usage of video conferencing has allowed for virtual sight-lines which are perceived as increasing stress as a result of continuous monitoring and feelings of invasion of privacy.

Odutola (2020) avers that though teleworking is far from being the norm in Nigeria, companies, firms and start-ups in the metropolis are beginning to embrace the remote work culture notwithstanding the major logistics drawbacks and problems such as poor power supply and unreliable internet access encountered in working remotely. Elaborating further, Odutola (2020) noted that while most employees who work from home are burdened with sourcing their own electricity to power their work devices (which is costly), others complain that their level of productivity while working from home is undermined as a result of certain peculiarities of home life and distractions from their immediate environments that they have to contend with.

### **3. Empirical Review of Literature**

Bloom *et al.* (2015) ran a nine-month experiment on teleworking on 996 employees in the airfare and hotel departments of the Shanghai call centre and found out an increase of about 13% in the performance of the home workers over the nine months of the experiment. Gajendran and Harrison (2007) in their meta-analyses of 46 studies in natural settings involving 12,883 employees found positive effects of teleworking for individuals with respect to work-life conflict, job satisfaction and wellbeing.

Shellenback and Polovina (2020) from the research conducted for Mercer, a world leading professional services firm located in Canada, suggest that 67% of companies implemented mandatory teleworking policies either company-wide or in locations or departments most affected by Covid-19 infections in March and April 2020. Gartner (2020a) a world leading research and advisory company and a member of the S&P 500 conducted a survey in April 2020 on 229 Human Resources (HR) departments which showed that nearly 50% of organizations had more than 80% of their employees working remotely from home during early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic with an overall estimated substantial long-term increase for teleworking after the pandemic.

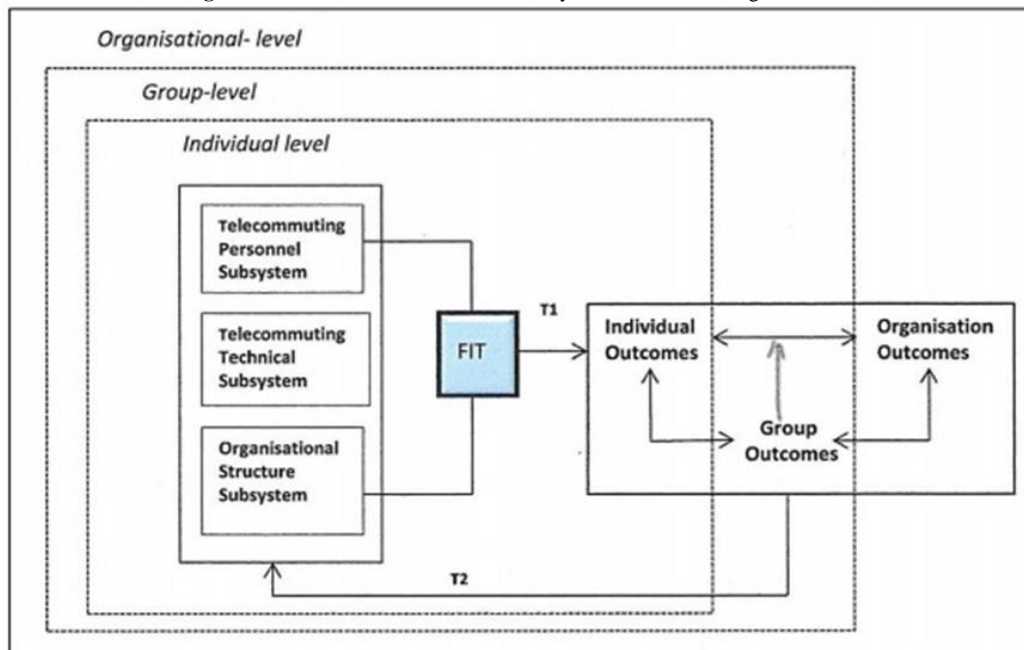
Onyeukwu *et al.* (2020) conducted a survey on how telecommuting could serve as a panacea to the spread of Covid-19 in Nigerian Universities with 119 respondents (36 lecturers and 83 students) and concluded that teleworking is an effective strategy the Nigerian government should adopt in the educational sector to avoid any future disease spread that would disrupt the academic activities. The speed with which many organizations adjusted to the health crisis by performing a significant number of jobs from home is indicative that the use of telework pre-crisis was well below what is feasible. Ozimek (2020), noted from a survey on remote working and hiring of managers in the US, that 94 per cent of the 1500 surveyed indicated that some of their workers teleworked during the crisis. Similarly, in another survey by Brynjolfsson *et al.* (2020), out of 25 000 respondents surveyed in April 2020, which is representative for the US population, 34 per cent of those employed four weeks prior indicated having switched to telework during this pandemic period. Several recent surveys show that a large number of employers offer at least some forms of workplace flexibility scheduling options to their employees, and that the availability of many flex options has increased in recent years.

### **4. Theoretical Framework: Socio-Technical Systems (STS) Theory**

The socio-technical system's theory propounded the balancing and interconnection / interconnectivity of the work 'social' and the work 'technical' subsystems within an organization (Trist *et al.*, 1963) and was established according to Eason (2013) to help elucidate the human and organizational effects of the introduction of mechanisation into coal mining and other industries. According to Green *et al.* (2017), the STS theory provides a framework for a comprehensive analysis of telework and recognises that the work system is open and subject to a wide range of environmental factors including and not limited to financial changes, market forces, technical developments and physical disturbances (Eason, 2013).

Green *et al.* (2017) opine that a framework for teleworking based on STS theory proposes a multi-level approach to address all system elements. Bélanger *et al.* (2012) developed a framework to define and combine the different aspects of teleworking into the personnel, technical and organizational subsystems and looks into how the three subsystems (organisational level, group level, and individual level) are affected by other causal events in the work environment, termed joint causation. The principle of joint causation leads to the concept of joint optimization or the potential of work systems to achieve their intended change process. Explaining further, Green *et al.* (2017) aver that these concepts emphasise feedback loops over time and through different levels of analysis as the work system tries to reach a state of stability. Green *et al.* (2017) use the concept of 'fit' to represent these principles in Figure 2, and the effects of time on adoption and outcomes of telework are shown by T1 and T2.

Figure-2. A Multi-Level Socio-Technical Systems Telecommuting Framework



Source: Adapted from Bélanger *et al.* (2012); Green *et al.* (2017)

The multi-level STS teleworking framework provides a superior way in which to conceptualise teleworking considering aspects that are embedded in this working practice from personnel, technical and organizational-structure perspective, that is, across all the levels of the organization. It addresses multiple features of the work system, at multiple levels and considers their interactions and outcomes. This is suitable for the complex events that unfolded in adopting telework after the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, this framework has the capacity to consider inter-relationships between the sub-systems, the outcomes, and how they may change over time through the feedback loops presented. The personnel subsystem contains factors relating to personal, social and cultural aspects for teleworkers such as individual characteristics, home-life situation, group relationships, and organizational culture. The personnel, as a factor is critical since the human factor (management inclusive) remains the engine and driver that facilitates all other systems / factors in the organizational structure. Factors that describe how the work is done and the type and availability of other resources required to perform the work are included in the technical subsystem, for example, ICT, task design. The organizational structure subsystem refers to aspects of the organizational structure and roles including management structure, practices and policies. The dashed lines of the model represent the permeability of the components across the levels of analysis, the sub-systems are interconnected and the outcomes are shown at the three levels. The concept of 'fit' is used to represent the interaction of the subsystems across the multiple levels and is a useful way to examine what did or did not 'work' for telework deployed in a post-disaster environment. This model can also identify and explore the effects of time on the teleworking system, which is especially relevant for the purposes of the present study; in the context of the extended Covid-19 pandemic era and continues even as many organizations returned to a business as usual - BAU situation (standard day-to-day business operations in an organization).

The ability to reflect upon change over time is an aspect of the STS model that makes it superior to other models since organizational change is a constant and telework as a practice is also very likely to change over time in tune with changes in organizational pressures, technical developments, globalization and demands of employees. One shortcoming of Bélanger's model is that it is yet to be extensively tested in a variety of teleworking environments and does not include the external environment to explore other impacts of telework across multiple levels of organizations. Furthermore, Green *et al.* (2017) noted that the framework has been used to explore organizations using telework in a 'business-as-usual' (BAU) context but not in response to organizational change following a natural disaster. The theory is very relevant to this present investigation because teleworking is becoming the new normal for most organizations and using a multi-level model involving personnel, technical and organizational subsystems it adjudged to be most suitable.

## 5. Methodology

This investigation adopted in-depth library research anchored on analytical discussion as the methodology. The review of secondary data were made and analysed thematically and discursively in line with the objectives of the study.

## 6. Teleworking in Post Covid-19: The Way Forward

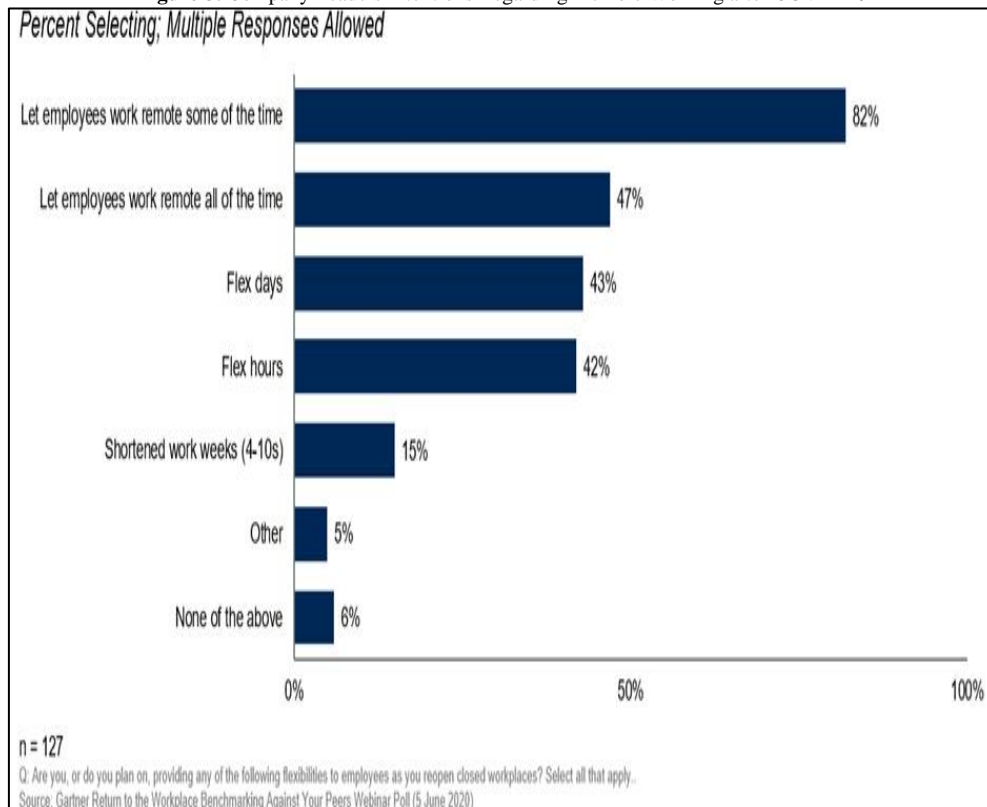
Countries, occupations, industries, and even organizations' differential usage and application of teleworking before and during the crisis provides useful information about its scope for more widespread use during normal times as well as being pointers and enlightening policy strategies on the factors that need to be put in place for both the efficient use of teleworking and those that may impede its use. For instance, according to [Organization for](#)

Economic Cooperation and Development OECD (2020), the extent to which such factors as inefficient management practices, lack of ICT skills or tasks requiring physical presence prevent the use of telework and are more commonplace in certain countries or types of organizations than others, cross-country or cross-firm differences in the prevalence of telework equally act as pointers to the scope for increasing telework efficiency through better management practices and public policies aimed at widening access to it. Therefore, information on the use of telework before the crisis can be said to be complementary to the insights gained from the use of telework during the crisis (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD, 2020).

Shellenback and Polovina (2020) pointed out that prior to the coronavirus pandemic, workspace designers and executives always worked together to design ‘high-touch, collaborative, open space work environments’ that encouraged possibilities for impromptu social interactions. World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that within this pandemic period people need to maintain at least one meter physical distance from each other and this applies to workspaces, unassigned seating, assigned seating, conference rooms, café tables, elevator capacity, etc. to ensure observance of physical distancing and other preventive non-pharmaceutical safeguards. This implies that seating will change to accommodate the latest directive for safe physical distancing and will affect the overall space requirements resulting in organizations incurring more facilities and occupancy costs. Given the current environmental and health situation, many organizations are re-thinking their corporate policies with regards to the necessity of expansive corporate square footage while considering other working options like teleworking.

Like a flipped switch, organizations are today opting for the virtual interaction environment which will involve office meetings being held virtually; webinars held in place of seminars and interactions with clients being conducted via digital channels and platforms rather than the face-to-face work. According to Gartner (2020b) survey conducted in July, of 127 company leaders, representing HR, Legal and Compliance, Finance as well as Real Estate, almost half (47%) spoke of their intention to allow employees to telework full time going forward. For some organizations, flex time will be the new normal as 43% of survey respondents reported they will grant employees flex days, while 42% will provide flex hours (see Figure 3).

Figure-3. Company Leaders Intentions Regarding Flexible Working after COVID-19



Source: Gartner (2020b)

Using the multi-level socio-technical systems (STS) telecommuting framework to analyse teleworking during the Covid-19 era, it is pertinent to note that at an organizational level the adoption of telework needs to be authorized prior to being imbibed as a practise after assessing its benefits and deeming it suitable with its technical capabilities for remote connection to the organization’s systems. At a group level the change to a telework arrangement will have to be facilitated through management support and provision of satisfactory IT systems. Some notable barriers for groups to teleworking include limitations of communication and collaboration and the lack of technological tools to support crucial functions. For the individual level, previous teleworking experiences plus favourable personal circumstances have a major role. Green et al. (2017) opine that the adoption of telework in a post-disaster environment (in this case Covid-19 pandemic) results in flexibility for balancing other commitments with work, though with some blurring of work-life boundaries.

Not disregarding the enormous benefits of teleworking, as it is becoming the in-thing and normal, organizational management policies and strategies on HR practices should initiate ways of accommodating the socially motivated

personnel in their organizations since the new normal bridges face-to-face interactions. Personnel who work as receptionists, behind the counter as in the banks, Public Relations Officers etc. have the penchant of meeting with people and this motivates them, should be adequately accommodated to make them highly productive in the new circumstances otherwise there would be slack in their commitment, satisfaction and eventual productivity which will affect both the organizations and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the economy.

Third World countries and their leaders have the onerous tasks of initiating development of facilities that enable internet, Information Communication Technology (ICT), etc. function as required. The absence or near absence of the above during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Nigeria and most other countries is decried as this sets the nations' education activities, economy etc. backward. The Covid-19 pandemic influence on the economy of almost all Third World countries and those others taken unawares could be likened to the influence of globalization that whipped all economies into line with no excuses (Wokoma and Iheriohanma, 2010).

Odutola (2020), posits that to successfully accommodate a remote workforce, there is the need to reinforce communication channels to avoid communication breakdown. It is equally important to ensure that such communication corridors like virtual platforms such as Slack, Zoom, Skype and Google Meets which host features that enable video conferencing, virtual meetings and presentations, instant messaging, and screen sharing are secured to make certain that sensitive and confidential information does not fall into the wrong hands. The size of an organization, notwithstanding, cyber security vulnerability can hold dire consequences for the firm's business and reputation.

## 7. Conclusion

Bearing in mind the risk and the remarkable probability of transmission of Covid-19 infection from both daily long commutes and in office environments due to the long incubation period, teleworking seems to be the best possible option to help cushion the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic both on the economy and society. In this respect, supporting firms' or individuals' ICT investments related to teleworking can be considered wise decision as it helps in improving productivity. Teleworking, like globalization, has come to stay and the world is constantly witnessing one pandemic or the other. The Covid-19 pandemic has come as a pointer to both national leaders – developed and developing economies – and organizational management to critically appraise the benefits and demerits of new work trends and the subsequent challenges there from. The discussion indicates that many organizations and economies have embraced the system and have remained futuristic. Teleworking, as an offshoot of the new work trends and a structure and system to mitigate the attendant effects, has definitely come as a new normal; and there appears to be no alternative than this normal.

## Recommendations

1. There is need for organizations to understand the benefits of using workplace flexibility for both increasing employee efficiency and productivity and attracting and retaining high-performing employees in this Covid-19 era. This is necessary not to create avenue for high-performing employees to exit the organizations.
2. Organizational management should formulate strategic HRM practices sustainable enough not only to retain their employees but to cater for socially imbued employees who may prefer face-to-face interactions which are inhibited by the physical and social distancing caused by the pandemic. Management should realize that it costs much to hire and train new staff should there be no structural and systematic ways of motivating all staff in this new normal.
3. There is need for organizational assessment of the impact of teleworking on all its subsystems including personnel, technical and organizational to ensure systematic fit as there is no alternative to the new normal work trends.

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