

Undercover Unemployment during COVID-19 pandemic: Qualitative study of public organizations in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

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Abstract—Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, countries hurried to offer unprecedented levels of emergency support to keep companies afloat, protect jobs and incomes and prevent the economy from collapsing. The Kingdom of Bahrain has adopted a vast range of preventive measures aimed at ensuring social distancing. Schools closed, private and public organizations switched to remote working. The quick and urgent shift to remote working policy has an impact on public organizations. A national study carried out by the Bahrain Institute of Public Administration (BIPA) in 2020 identified undercover Unemployment which is low productivity among employees working from home (WFH). Similar observations were reported within the context of COVID-19 and were explained with specific characteristics of WFH and its emerging challenges. This study investigates the factors behind the (UU) in the public organizations during the pandemic. Moreover, it proposes managerial solutions to public organizations towards sustainability and advocacy during the pandemic. Qualitative study used 12 semi-directive interviews have been conducted with public organizations' employees working in ministries in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The findings of this study will provide insights on the different reasons for (UU) during the pandemic. The results can assist managers and public organizations design constructive strategies to improve employee's productivity and reduce (UU) during the pandemic.

Keywords—Public Organization, Covid-19 pandemic, Work Productivity, Undercover Unemployment, Remote Work, Working from home (WFH)

I. INTRODUCTION

During the initial weeks and months the Covid-19 Pandemic, precautionary measures were called upon to stop the virus from spreading. This global situation has affected workplace settings, and jobs with high physical proximity were most disrupted. Remote-work or working from home (WFH) is a policy that already exists pre-Covid-19. Bahrain adopted preventive measures to contain the spread of the virus. Schools, universities, and different public & private organizations were directed to initiate remote working whenever possible, preventing the spread of virus the functioning of different organizations. Subsequently, many workers found themselves suddenly obliged to working from home (WFH). With most organizations adopting WFH, loss of productivity or "undercover unemployment" has been observed according to a recent study by BIPA. Low reliability, significant loss of productivity, and detachment from the organization were negative implications for

working from home. Those negative implications of such a work policy call upon the need for an investigation, especially with the short foresight regarding the current situation with Covid-19 and the possible need for an extended social distancing. They understand those negative implications causing the loss of productivity, while WFH can provide us with the needed insight into how WFH can be a successful policy ensuring desired organizational goals are being met. On the contrary, failure to address such implications may affect the overall productivity of an organization and create differences between its employees. Reasonable and well-proposed solutions can help make WFH a sustainable work policy that different jobs can accommodate in the future. This study investigates the factors behind the low productivity of employees in the public organizations during WFH using a semi-directive interview with public organizations' employees working remotely in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The study results reveal that working from home affects the productivity of the employees. While the effects of some of the factors are either positive or negative, the influence of some of the factors relies on the traits and attitude of the personnel and the situations.

II. COVID-19 AND THE UNDERCOVER UNEMPLOYMENT

The sudden shift to WFH imposed a new Normal for both employees and administration. The vast majority of employees and managers were also experiencing WFH for the first time [8]. The employees shifted to a new work environment guided by more self-discipline and commitment compared to the classic work environment where the employees may have to record their attendance every day and perform under the direct supervision of their manager. Managers as well did not have the experience to deal with the new situation. The usual way of monitoring and controlling employee performance might not succeed anymore [4];[7]. Added to this is the uniqueness of the situation of COVID-19. The lockdown affected multiple sectors raising the challenge for employees. For instance, Employees needed to take care of extra tasks at home, including child education and house cleaning, besides their work duties due to the lockdown or the shift to remote working. All these factors significantly impacted employees' productivity [12]. A national study carried out by the Bahrain Institute of Public Administration identified undercover unemployment as low productivity among employees WFH. Similar observations were reported within the context of COVID-19 and explained with specific characteristics of

WFH and its emerging challenges [16]. The undercover unemployment (UU) is a new term used to describe a situation that did not emerge with COVID-19. Instead, it is a term used to describe underemployment, which is the fact that an employee's productivity is low compared to the high number of employees filling too few jobs [3]. Another term, disguised unemployment, was also used to describe "when part of the labor force is either left without work or is working in a redundant manner such that worker productivity is essentially zero a similar term defined as "surplus in the labor force" and reduction in productivity" [6].

Different research [2];[11];[13];[15] shows that, during the lockdown and through the opening-up phase of the pandemic, the pandemic dropped, and managers were concerned by the loss of productivity. Employees had considered working from home as vacation and stop answering their phones and reply to supervisor emails. Low productivity had a significant impact on the satisfaction of the customers and the organization's overall performance [5];[9];[14].

The objective of this research is to investigate the reasons behind undercover unemployment during the pandemic. The findings of this study will provide insights into the different reasons for undercover unemployment and low productivity during the pandemic. The results can assist managers and public organizations design constructive strategies to improve productivity while WFH.

III. UNDERCOVER UNEMPLOYMENT IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS IN BAHRAIN: A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

To investigate the reasons behind undercover unemployment in the Kingdom of Bahrain, a qualitative study was used. Several 12 semi-directive interviews were carried out and saturation was respected when conducting the interviews. The participants were randomly selected from public organizations in the country. The data collected were transcribed in English for this paper. In this research, the employees of the Kingdom of Bahrain discussed and described their experience during the global flu outbreak known as Covid-19. Twelve sampled employees have been contacted to collect data for the research project's purposes and to answer the research question. Criteria for this fellowship include Bahraini employees who have worked from home during the pandemic. The employees were chosen from different ministries. When reporting data, and for confidentiality purposes, the names and identities of the interviewees will be changed to a pseudonym that will be used through the analysis. The demographics are presented in "Table 1".

All interviews were done with Ms-Teams, with a flexible schedule, during which results will be supplied as requested. The interviews took between 20 to 40 minutes and, with the respondents' permission. All interviews were taped, and the complete transcripts were prepared. The data were re-read to guarantee correctness after it was transcribed. A substantial amount of textual data were generated from the interviews, which were used to apply theme analysis to find similar actions among employees of different ministries and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the overall picture. Our research question was answered due to significant, meaningful themes related to propositions and objectives.

TABLE 1: Respondents Characteristics

	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Self-reported income	Position	Seniority
1	Female	27	single	Medium	Educational Supervision	Senior (6 y)
2	Female	32	Single	Medium	Academic Manager	Senior (13 y)
3	Female	28	Single	Medium	Academic	Senior (6 y)
4	Male	32	Married	Medium	Accountant	Senior (12 y)
5	Male	42	widower	Medium	Secretary Specialist	Senior (20 y)
6	Female	37	Married	High	Manager	Senior (10 y)
7	Female	33	Single	Medium	Admin (not specified)	Senior (6 y)
8	Female	23	Married	Medium	Admin (not specified)	Junior (4y)
9	Female	34	Married	Medium	Admin (not specified)	Senior (7 y)
10	Female	34	Single	Medium	Admin (not specified)	Senior (6 y)
11	Male	35	Married	High	Manager	Senior (14 y)
12	Female	45	Single	Medium	Admin (not specified)	(Senior (11 y)

IV. ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

By analysing the narratives of the 12 Bahraini employees, different categories and themes emerged. Those categories and themes then were compared back to the initial research questions to help explain the phenomena. The themes were combined into three categories:

1. The experience of remote work during the pandemic in the kingdom of Bahrain
2. The reasons for low productivity and undercover unemployment and,
3. The definition of undercover unemployment.

A. The experience of remote work in Bahraini public organizations

To slow the spread of the virus, offices across the country have been shut down, and remaining workers have worked from home to keep themselves and others safe. The majority of the respondents (12/12) declared they worked from home during the pandemic. They added that was their first experience of WFH: "I never worked from home before"; "it is the first time to work from home." However, the work from home was not a clear cut for the majority of the interviewees (9/12): "nothing was clear"; "I do not know how I will do my work from home"; "I was not prepared for that".

The results reported that the majority of the interviewees (9/12) who have worked from home during the pandemic perceive the experience in a positive way. Some interviewees (5/12) indicated that working from home is beneficial in allowing one to spend more time with their children and parents. Other responders (4/12) reported improvements in their mental and physical health throughout this time period:

"I start to exercise daily"; "no stress and I can even sleep better". The majority of the participants (10/12) stated a change in their daily routine and how they manage the tasks assigned by their jobs. Working from home has granted them "more flexibility" regarding time management compared to pre-Covid.

A minority of interviewees (3/12) said there were no positive outcomes from working from home during the lockdown period: "very stressful, my kids were with me at home, I couldn't work properly"; "I was exhausted and tired all the time"; "I prefer going to the office rather than working from home".

The majority of the interviewees (10/12) mentioned the change in productivity during the lockdown. Indeed, half of the responders (6/12) advanced that during the pandemic, their workload increase: "I have many tasks to do" and their productivity is more effective than before on the office: "I become productive"; "I do not lose time in traffic, I only do my job better than before"; "now it takes me less time to do my job effectively." Some even reported how the lockdown and remote work increase their innovation and creativity: "I was focused, I present a creative solution to my boss." Other respondents (5/12) mentioned low workload and productivity during the lockdown: "I spend more than three weeks without doing anything"; "I keep calling my supervisor asking her to give me something to do, but nothing was to do"; "I was bored, I have nothing to do for my first time since I started this job."

B. The factors of low productivity and undercover unemployment during the pandemic

Productivity was an issue during the pandemic. In fact, different factors impact employee's productivity was during the lockdown such as the workload of the job, the lack of resources, the organizational communication, and the work-family conflict.

The workload of the job

During the lockdown, some interviewees (5/12) stated that the number of daily tasks assigned to them had been reduced after shifting to WFH. Women with children were asked to stay at home during the lockdown, and their tasks were given to their colleagues working on the site: "married women are at home with their kids to take care of them"; "I am single, so I have to come two times a week to finish my tasks and my colleague's tasks, who are at home with their kids." Some employees perceived this situation as unfair: "because I am a man, so I have to do the work of all my colleague's women! Is not fair!".

Lack of resources

The majority of the responders (10/12) reported the lack of resources as the main factor of low productivity during the pandemic: "I cannot do my job, I do not have a good connection at home"; "without computer, I could not do my works". For some of them, the problem of resources was related to the system of the organization. indeed, organizations have an internal database that employees can't access when they are at home: "the system cannot open only in my office." When asked if they were provided with the needed appliances to perform their tasks from home, some participants (4/12) indicated being provided with the necessary tools, while others (3/12) stated the lack of support

or tools during the lockdown: "It is like you are constantly working but without any assistance or tools"; "your demands are ignored". They added that they had to provide those appliances by themselves.

The organizational communication

When interviewed, the participants indicated a lack of communication with their team members, managers, and colleagues. Such problem was shown in handling persistent problems during the pandemic: "they don't answer to my emails and my calls"; "how can I work if my colleagues never answer to my calls". They reported the lack of a clear information, procedures and rules regarding the new tasks and responsibilities: "we don't know who do what and when". Some of the respondents (3/12) mentioned that some of their colleagues and subordinates consider WFH as a vacation and don't work: "at home, not in the office no one can bother them during the vacation".

The work-family conflict

The balance between professional and personal life was mentioned as a major factor that have an impact on the productivity of the employees working from home during the pandemic. Employees with kids were more concerned with these issues rather than interviewees without kids. The majority of the participants (9/12) explained how hard was for them to balance between their job daily tasks and family responsibilities: "my kids were at home, and I couldn't do my job". This had an impact on their productivity and effectiveness: "I was not able to do anything".

The definition of undercover unemployment

The majority (11/12) of the interviewees were aware of undercover unemployment during the lockdown. They define it as a "low productivity" among employees during the pandemic: "employees do not work at all"; "they refuse to do their tasks and responsibilities." Some participants (4/12) stated that it is due to the "inappropriate distribution of tasks to the employees," resulting in unequal workload allocation. In both cases, low productivity of work is a visible indicator and criteria to recognize undercover unemployment in the organization. The responders mentioned a need for a "regular meeting" in which roles are assigned and communicated. "Continuous supervision" over the tasks done from home is also suggested to ensure the effectiveness of WFH.

V. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To investigate the reasons behind the loss of productivity and undercover unemployment during the Covid-19 in Bahraini public organizations. Accurate data from 12 participants working in different public organizations were analyzed. The findings help to answer the research questions and objectives. The results helped draw a clearer picture of the nature of WFH employed by the public sector during Covid-19 in Bahrain and the reasons behind undercover unemployment in Bahraini public organizations.

The majority of the participants indicated a loss of productivity during the pandemic. they consider it the primary indicator of undercover unemployment in their organizations where some employees do a minimal workload. Different reasons related to the Bahraini context that caused the undercover unemployment during the pandemic were identified. First, the disrupted routines had an

impact on the workload of the employees. At the pandemic's beginning, employees were in a low workload and were not doing anything for weeks and months. Lack of resources such as access to the internet, computers, and the organization database and platform was another reason behind low productivity and undercover unemployment during the pandemic. The absence of regular communication between the employee, colleagues, and managers reduced the collaboration and aggravated undercover unemployment [1]. Some employees consider the absence of communication with the managers and colleagues as a vacation. The balance between personal and professional life was another reason which impact employee productivity working from home during the pandemic. Indeed, during the lockdown, schools and daycare were also closed due to the pandemic. Employees, especially women, were the most concerned by the decrease in productivity due to their duty to take care of their kids.

However, workplace disruption due to COVID-19 is unavoidable for all firms. In addition to maintaining corporate operations during the outbreak, those who successfully manage interruption will be better prepared for future crises. Managers have a larger duty than ever to establish workplace culture and behavior wherever people work.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

This research concludes that working from home during the pandemic reduces employee productivity and leads to undercover unemployment. Improving remote employees' productivity and keeping them engaged, productive, and focused present significant challenges for managers of Bahraini ministries. Redesigning precise tasks, responsibilities, and clear procedures help to fix and keep the workload at an adequate level. Remote employees will be more engaged and motivated to do their job and stay productive. Managers should also build a solid and clear protocol around response times and schedules about: when employees are expected to work and when they are available to respond to requests on time.

An advantage of WFH is the relatively flexible working hours. A flexible schedule will help managers be empathetic and understand workers who may have children and other responsibilities at home. WFH requires employees well-equipped to stay connected and productive. At its core, working from home need many types of equipment to stay connected and productive. Organizations should support employees with the needed tools to do their job. Indeed, interviewees were asked if their jobs can be performed remotely without losing productivity and effectiveness. The majority have advanced that "trends that have emerged during the pandemic might be further improved to ensure better performance post-Covid-19 if companies choose to employ WFH in the future".

Another drawback of WFH is miscommunication or lack of communication. The majority of the participants indicated that the loss of productivity and the undercover unemployment perceived is due to communication issues. Remote employees work better under managers who communicate clearly and frequently. Managers should also collect feedback about the challenges employees face when working remotely and how this affects their employment. Is it faster or slower? Are some projects easier to do at home?

Moreover, the lack of supervision is also a drawback of WFH [1]. On the contrary, workers reporting to the office have higher productivity as they are constantly supervised.

However, with concise routine plans and procedures, several employees will fail to accomplish assigned work. That is due to other factors such as the organizations' attitudes and policies concerning WFH, the employees' characteristics and attitude, and the circumstances [10]; [14]. Productivity increases if employees feel trusted and cared for by their employer and have access to timely training, project management, and resources. Personal traits like self-control, self-efficacy, time management abilities, and the desire to work remotely significantly impact the engagement and productivity of remote employees. Employees who lack desire and work discipline at home and need external pressure to be organized and maintain a work rhythm will see a severe drop in production.

Work-life balance is another example of a component whose influence is dependent on employee preferences and circumstances. WFH allows employees more flexibility in their work schedules, allowing them to spend more time with their families, reducing work-life conflicts, and increasing job satisfaction and productivity. However, balancing employment, family obligations, and young children can reduce their productivity.

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