The Impact of Communication Technology on Employee Productivity During Government Mandated Lockdown in Canada

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A Literature Review

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# Abstract

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic the Canadian government, like many other governments around the world, began imposing lockdown measures, forcing organizations to rapidly adapt to hiring, training, retaining, and enabling a remote workforce. This literature review examines the impact of communications technologies, both existing and emergent, on employees’ productivity during lockdown in Canadian organizations. By synthesizing and evaluating scholarly articles, empirical studies, and reports by trusted sources, this review provides insight into the impact that these communications technologies had, and continue to have, on employee productivity in the workplace under unprecedented circumstances. The goal of this paper is to present existing research and to provide additional data where knowledge or information is lacking.

For many Canadians, the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was a fairly immediate and jarring series of events, culminating in several provinces and territories implementing lockdown policies, procedures, and processes over only a few days, overnight, or even the same day in some cases. This immediacy after the World Health Organization announced COVID-19 a global pandemic disrupted countless organizations, both private and public. As employees moved from an on-premises workforce to a remote one, the role of communications technology became as prioritized as critical infrastructure. Modern communications technology has come a long way and gone are the days that productivity meant a multi-party email chain filled with attachments. Today, communications technologies encompass many facets of human interaction and collaboration, including video and tele-conferencing, instant messaging, project management software, voice over internet protocol or private branch exchange phone systems, and of course email.

The solution for the lockdown was, of course, working from home or working remotely, something that was previously only available to the privileged few. This presented unique opportunities and challenges for the Canadian workforce. On one hand, this shift in mindset and procurement of tools enabled and encouraged seamless communication and collaboration, bridging the physical divide between employees. Video conferencing platforms became extremely popular, very quickly. For example, Zoom’s stock price rose over 700% during the initial waves of the pandemic, going from USD $76.02 on January 6th, 2020, to USD $559 on October 20th the same year (statista, 2023). Instant messaging software rapidly grew in popularity as well, eclipsing email usage by multitudes in only a few months. Microsoft Teams grew from 32 million daily active users on March 12th, 2020, to 44 million a week later (Spataro, 2020). By October 27th, 2020, Teams had tripled their daily active users to 115 million (Warren, 2020).

On the other hand, the suddenness of the lockdowns and the rapid adaptation of work from home lifestyle has introduced challenges, both human and technical in nature, that need to be navigated. Technological barriers including technical ability and disparities in access to internet in Canada, especially in rural areas, is a formidable challenge in of itself, affecting the ability of some Canadians to fully leverage the tools required to effectively work from home. Moreover, the increased reliance on digital communications has led to informational overload and digital fatigue as employees are inundated by communications from multiple sources, including email, instant messaging, and video conferencing. Fatigue can very quickly lead to burnout, as these sources are also used in a personal context outside of work to talk with family and friends also in lockdown, to watch presentations or seminars for education, or to learn or build on new or existing skills or hobbies (Sharma, 2021). Furthermore, the boundaries of work and life become increasingly blurred in a work from home environment, as many employees find it difficult to establish clear and personally enforceable separations between their professional and personal lives. This can be exacerbated by poor management training or techniques and sub-par or toxic organizational culture.

# Literature Review

## Digital Literacy Among Canadians in Lockdown

According to Statistics Canada, 94% of all Canadians had household internet access in 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2020), showing that Canadians have, mostly, adopted a connected lifestyle. This does not speak to digital literacy, however, which is among the worst in developed countries, ranking 23 on the 2021 Digital Skills Gap Index (Wiley, 2021). Historically, the Canadian government has placed an emphasis on digital literacy as being a key proponent in the future of the Canadian workforce, although this goal has been marred over the years by the differences in elected political parties and, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Canadian Adoption of Communication Technologies During Lockdown

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