

THESIS BOOKLET

**The impact of remote work on change  
management in the era of a pandemic**

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## INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 21st century, business literature facing global businesses primarily focused on how to mitigate business failure and much of this was based on two fundamental assumptions: the increasing primacy of markets and the global business ecosystem (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). With the emergence of the 21st century, the business environment has become more complex and uncertain, with an increasing number of uncertainties such as pandemics, economic downturns, climate change, or war.

It is not surprising that past studies on business failure have overlooked the impact of extreme environmental shocks and "black swan" events such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Such types of events are rare and unpredictable, and so they may not have been studied as extensively as more common issues within the field.

The selection of change management as a research topic considering the COVID-19 pandemic is a logical choice as it allowed to study the impact of the pandemic on organizations, how they adapted to the changes it brought about and how employees adjusted to the new situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift towards remote work and digitalization of many industries. While some companies had plans in place for business continuity, the sudden and widespread nature of the pandemic caught many off guard and required a rapid shift to remote work. Leading to significant changes in the way we work, including an increase in remote and hybrid work models.

Many researchers (Caramela, 2021; Choudhury, 2020; Junnaid et al., 2020) rise the importance of change management, especially where organizations were confronted with COVID-19. An uncertainty in form of the recent pandemic has upended not only personal daily life

(Collins, 2020), but also operational processes. Whilst reflecting to the first quarter of 2020, vanilla strategies (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014) did not work, and classic change management was turned upside down without required technology in place and one saw a need to utilize a rapid cycle change model to prepare for a variety of scenarios (Balluck et al., 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and assess the effects of certain change management models on the transition from working in an office to working remotely initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper aims to evaluate how these models supported the shift and what impact they had on the process, identify the key steps in the change process that were most effectively implemented, those that were overlooked. It also seeks to provide information on how leadership can better prepare for and respond to similar crises in the future.

## **Synopsis of the research strategy**

This thesis leveraged a quantitative research approach and deployed an online survey to collect numerical data from a targeted group. The survey was designed to gather specific information needed to test hypotheses and establish cause-and-effect relationships. The target group was defined by specific characteristics, such as demographics, education, or employment. The data collected has been analysed using statistical methods to draw conclusions and make inferences about the population.

Empirical research is a method of acquiring knowledge through observation and experimentation. It involves collecting data through various means, such as surveys, interviews, experiments, and case studies, then analysing it to draw conclusions and develop inferences. The choice of research methodology and data analysis method depend on the research question, the type of data being collected, and the resources available. Some common data analysis methods include descriptive, inferential statistics, as well as qualitative analysis. Choosing the appropriate method and conducting the analysis rigorously is crucial for ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings.

### **Quantitative analysis**

The author of this thesis chose a quantitative research approach to try something new and different from previous research done by the author and believed that a qualitative analysis would not provide new insights as a quantitative approach. It was assumed that the decided approach allowed for a more objective, systematic, and controlled examination of the pandemic phenomenon, which might have been beneficial in this certain research context and offer a fresh perspective on this topic.

The attraction of quantitative data analysis is the expectation to turn raw data into meaningful information through the application of rational and critical thinking.

### **Survey process and platform**

The selection of data platform fell on the Enterprise Feedback Suite (EFS), a professional solution for web based. It is also compliant with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which is important for ensuring that the data is handled and protected according to the GDPR regulations. In this analysis, no personal data relating to respondents was collected, which limited the risk of data breaches or GDPR violation.

The survey was online for 38 days starting with June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, and produced a return rate of 174 finished surveys or a completion rate of 32.34%. What this means is that out of the total number of people who accessed the survey, which was 538, 174 people completed the survey.

The completion rate, or the percentage of people who completed the survey out of the total number of people who accessed it, is an important metric in evaluating the success of a survey. A high completion rate indicates that the survey was well-designed and that the participants were engaged and motivated to complete it. A low completion rate, on the other hand, could indicate that the survey was too long, difficult to understand, or not relevant to the participants. It is important to note that the completion rate of 32.34% is a good return rate, as it implies that more than a third of people who accessed the survey completed it.

The collection of data excluded social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Mastodon, or any other platforms. The decision to not include these data sources was made because the target sample size was originally set at 100. Once that number was reached

through the online survey, the author of this thesis refrained from tapping into additional data sources.

Using social networks as a data source can be a useful way to reach a large and diverse sample, but it is also important to also consider the potential biases that may be introduced when using these platforms.

The survey was anonymous, and the language of the questionnaire was set to English. Anonymity can help to increase the honesty and accuracy of the responses, and by setting the language of the questionnaire to English, it increases the chances of reaching a larger number of participants who are proficient in the language.

### **Challenges of the analysis**

There were/are several challenges that can arise when conducting quantitative analysis, and the common ones are: inaccurate data quality, too small sample size, measurement errors or wrong data interpretation.

- **Sample bias:** The pandemic could have disproportionately affected certain populations, leading to biased samples. For example, individuals who are older or had underlying health conditions at that time may have less likely participated in a study due to increased risk of severe illness.
- **Data analysis:** The pandemic may have had unpredictable effects on variables being studied, making it difficult to separate the effects of the pandemic from other factors.
- **Generalizability:** The effects of the pandemic can vary by location and over time, making it difficult to generalize findings.
- **Ethical considerations:** Researcher need to consider the potential risks and benefits of conducting research during a pandemic and obtain informed consent from participants while ensuring their privacy and safety.

- Time-sensitive research: The pandemic was a rapidly changing situation and research findings may become quickly outdated.

Reason for not extending the research on any war or political conflict situation, was that conducting quantitative research in a war zone can present significant ethical and practical challenges. The threat of physical harm and emotional pain to researchers and participants can make data collection and analysis difficult and even impossible. Additionally, the unstable and rapidly changing nature of a war zone can make it difficult to predict what data will be available and when. As Osorio (2014, p. 1) argues “violence increases methodological problems of bias, measure validity, and causal inference”. The effects of the war may vary by location and over time, making it difficult to generalize findings from a study to other populations or time periods.



## HYPOTHESIS VALIDATION

### Research question 1

*How can organizations foster relationships and nurture their employee's mental health while also planning for an uncertain future and drive growth?*

### Result hypothesis: H1

*A change management approach requires two perspectives, an organizational perspective (how groups can be managed through a change) and an individual perspective (how people experience change), which require parallel focuses during the process to sustain both workforce health and successful business transformation.*

The question focused on understanding how organizations can foster relationships and nurture their employees' mental health while also planning for an uncertain future and driving growth.

Outcome: Research question and hypothesis confirmed.

The survey results suggest that a change management approach that considers both organizational and individual perspectives is crucial for successful change within an organization. To support this 73% of the 174 respondents agreed or completely agreed that an organizational culture is necessary when change is taking place, this importance is driven mostly by individual contributors (68%) and even management (81%). This indicates that the individual perspective supported though organizational culture has a significant impact on a change process. Interesting to see this is slightly more driven by women (41%) than men (32%) to see a need for an organizational culture when change is taking place. Organizational culture and effective communication were therefore found to be supportive during change, aligning with the ideologies of Kotter and the ADKAR model.

Respondents were diverse in their experiences with previous change processes, with some indicating a lack of knowledge of supportive actions from top-down e.g., through change-champs or mitigation plans. Although 51% had no or did not know about support through change-champs (Wilcoxon  $p=0.954$ ), the awareness of short-term wins through communication was at 65%.

Then involvement in the decision-making process is mainly reserved towards leadership (97%) as the data shows which identifies an organizational perspective, other career stages are involved as well as the data shows, but from the difference between being engaged or not leadership is certainly standing out. This is also supported through the crosstab analysis which showed that people being involved are significantly more aware of resistance mitigation plans than others ( $\chi^2 = 6.14, p = 0.047$ ).

There is also a clear indicator about communication in early stages which comes from top-down (Kotter, 1996), the supportive response rate was 85% - again an indicator of the two perspectives as mentioned in hypothesis H1.

Last the hypothesis was confirmed by the indicator of the last measure of this indicating that there must be two change processes and perspectives when it comes to change as 86% responded supportive when being asked about relevant support to work from home during the first lockdown. These results suggest that both organizational and individual perspectives should be considered and addressed in parallel during a change process.

## **Research question 2**

*How much flexibility in workforce management does leadership have during transitioning through uncertain times?*

## **Result hypothesis H2**

*People and teams must be supported by management with empathy and optimism, which will foster focus on what can be controlled as opposed to being consumed by chaos.*

This question aimed to investigate to what extent leadership can manage their workforce flexibly during periods of uncertainty and transition and the second hypothesis aimed in regards of change management at the middle segments of both the 8 steps model and ADKAR: empowerment and knowledge.

Outcome: Research question and hypothesis confirmed.

The data analysed for this hypothesis shows that respondents were engaged, mostly supported, in a way developed, and treated with empathy during the lockdowns.

69% of respondents reported that During the Covid-19 lockdowns their team celebrated successes remotely, with the age group born in the 1970s being the most likely to engage in such celebrations. 18% of respondents reported not engaging in remote celebrations.

Respondents also reported positively on organizing their time during lockdown, 62% of respondents reported that they had flexibility to organize their work time while working from home during the lock-down.

A crosstab analysis was able to confirm the assumption of a relation between celebrating success and communication of short-term wins ( $\chi^2 = 29.16$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ).

The measurements also verified that management did support their teams during lockdown, most respondents (75%) reported feeling positively motivated by their manager to continue performing well in their job while working remotely. 81% of the respondents reported that their manager had a positive perception of working from home. There were no significant differences in perception

of support through management based on gender or other demographic variables. Interestingly 17% reported not positive about being motivated by their manager.

In terms of personal and professional development while working from home, 55% of the respondents reported engaging in self-paced training to develop new skills that helped them accomplish their work better. 20% of respondents reported receiving support from their manager for skill development, while 26% either did not know how to or did not attempt to develop new skills.

Almost all respondents (90%) rated video conferencing tools positively for improving collaboration, however with no differentiation made between personal or professional collaboration. The perception of improvement in collaboration was balanced across career stages, with 86% of leadership, 88% of individual contributors, and 94% of management finding it positive.

Last, during the initial stages of the change process brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, 68% of the respondents observed positive behaviours such as appreciation and emphasis from leadership. However, 32% also reported observing negative behaviours from leadership during this time.

Above examples all indicate that Kotter's 5<sup>th</sup> step in his model (1996) which is called empowerment can certainly be leveraged in a scenario of a pandemic and therefore confirm the hypothesis H2.

### **Research question 3**

*Are organizations adequately equipped and structured to deal with challenges of the future?*

### **Result hypothesis H3**

*The transformation to the nowhere office is inevitable.*

There will be a transition to a nowhere office, building on change (Kotter, 1996) and reinforcing it (Hiatt, 2006). Respondents are mostly encouraged to have a hybrid work scenario going forward, also in the transition time managers were able to establish a work from home scenario for their employees and have been driving a new culture in that regard.

However, the personal mental equilibrium may have taken it's tolls during the pandemic, resulting in one measure returning as neutral whereas the next clearly indicating a

Outcome: Research question and hypothesis confirmed.

The results for this hypothesis suggest that most respondents agreed that they can have a better work-life balance while also working productively from home. 82% of respondents agree that it is possible to have a better work-life balance while also working productively from home, with only 11% disagreeing.

This sentiment is consistent across genders and across continents. Respondents generally also approved of a better work-life balance while working from home and in addition responded positively about the reset of stress through a home office. 67% responded positively about the reset of stress through a home office and 12% disagree, 21% of the respondents have no clear answer.

More than half responded that they experienced a loss of their mental equilibrium when starting to work from home. 55% of the respondents stated that they lost their mental equilibrium when starting to work from home and 34% disagreed with this statement. However, when including the ones not sure, it rises to 45%, which cannot be unconsidered in this analysis and therefore drives this measurement towards being neutral.

There is a plus of 10% on the female feedback supporting the fact of a loss of mental equilibrium than with men, which can be an indicator of personal and professional workload in one space.

Looking ahead many respondents will continue working from a hybrid office approach, meaning they will spend a certain number of days in the office or at any other place e.g., home. 67% will continue working in a hybrid office approach, meaning they will spend a certain number of days in the office or at any other place such as home.

When asked about the impacts when the participants started to work from home during the first Covid-19 lockdown, 87.36% of respondents reported observing individual changes.

The trend is that people's home changed (58% out of 174) when moving work to home, 48% raised that meeting increased, 32% had to deal with health issues and 12% provided feedback that nothing changed for them. Crosstab analysis confirmed these statements as the perception of a "transformation of the home sphere" is related to a loss of mental equilibrium, health issues are related to a perception of workplace stress and health issues are related to a loss of mental equilibrium.

The transformation to the nowhere i.e., home office is also unstoppable as 63% of the respondents confirmed to continue in a hybrid work arrangement, driven by women 64% versus men 36%.

This move towards home or hybrid office certainly drove organizational changes, but 91% out of 174 participants were immediately able to pursue their work from home.

## NEW SCIENTIFIC STATEMENTS

### H1 concluding new scientific statement #1

These results suggest that both organizational and individual perspectives should be considered and addressed in parallel during a change process and therefore lead to a new scientific statement:

*Successful remote work during a pandemic showed that management needs to drive a clear and consistent communication strategy to build trust and engagement, drive transparency, and mitigate resistance to change. Organizations must plan to reach all employees using various channels and methods.*

It is difficult to make a generalization about what all managers think regarding their employees coming to work. Historically, managers may have assumed that their employees come to work into a physical office (Suzman, 2020), as this was traditionally the norm. But with the rise of remote work (Choudhury, 2020; Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021; Hobsbawm, 2022; Seabrook, 2021) and the transformation towards a more flexible work environment, managers must adapt their assumptions and expectations about where and when their employees are working. Managers have had to adapt and learn to manage their teams effectively in a remote environment, which require different communication and management styles than through a traditional office setting. Additionally, managers need to consider factors such as time zone differences and technology infrastructure when managing remote teams. Overall, the shift towards remote work has presented new challenges, but also offers the potential for cost savings, increased productivity, and employee satisfaction, if approached thoughtfully and strategically.

The role of communication and transparency throughout the change process (Barrett, 2002; Elving, 2005) helps to reduce uncertainty and anxiety among employees. This includes communicating the reasons for the change, the benefits it brings, and the plans for implementing it. Clear and consistent communication is required to build trust and engagement among employees, it has to drive transparency and can build a positive organizational culture and can therefore then also help to mitigate resistance to change.

In the context of the recent pandemic, organizations need to plan also for the use of different communication channels and methods to reach all employees, especially those who may be working remotely, experiencing disruptions to their usual routines or have not the required knowledge to handle new technologies.

Effective communication during a pandemic requires the use of digital communication tools, such as videoconferencing and online collaboration platforms, to stay connected with employees and ensure that they are informed and engaged throughout the change process.

It is important to remember that communication should not only be top-down, but also bottom-up. A feedback mechanism must be in place, to allow employees to provide their input and concerns, as well as to show that their opinion matters. Last, communicating which measures being taken to ensure the safety and well-being of employees during the pandemic, and to provide support and resources for employees who may be experiencing stress or other challenges because of the pandemic.

Especially in a pandemic, it is important to be flexible and to use different communication methods to reach all employees and address their concerns.



## **H2 concluding new scientific statement #2**

*Management must be aware of remote employee burnout and isolation and take steps to prevent it, such as holding virtual meetings, promoting colleague connection, and providing resources and support for remote work.*

Management requires to be aware of the potential for isolation and burnout among remote employees and take steps to prevent or mitigate these issues. This can include encouraging regular virtual team meetings, providing opportunities for remote employees to connect with their colleagues, and providing the necessary resources and support for employees to work effectively from home. It must be recognized that when employees work remotely, they can feel isolated and disconnected from their colleagues (especially when working across different time-zones), leading to a decrease in motivation and job satisfaction. Regular virtual team meetings can help mitigate this issue by providing a space for remote workers to connect with their team, share their thoughts and experiences, and feel more connected to the company culture. Additionally, providing opportunities for remote employees to interact and build relationships with their colleagues can also help to prevent feelings of isolation. This could include virtual happy hours, coffee breaks, or other social events.

Moreover, it's important to ensure that remote employees have access to the necessary resources and support to work effectively from home, such as the right technology and tools, access to training and development opportunities, and clear communication channels with their managers and colleagues. This can help reduce stress and burnout and enable remote workers to be productive and engaged.

## **H2 concluding new scientific statement #3**

*Organizations need to be aware of legal, compliance and data security issues related to remote work and ensure that they are following all relevant laws and regulations (internal and external).*

All this transformation towards a remote workforce requires a strong governance and data privacy policies to ensure that employee data is handled responsibly and in compliance with relevant laws and regulations. This includes not only protecting employee's personal data but also ensuring that data is used in an ethical and fair manner. Organizations must address legal and data security issues related to remote work to ensure compliance with all relevant laws and regulation. Management must be mindful of the potential legal and data security risks associated with remote work and take necessary steps to ensure compliance with all relevant laws and regulations. This includes internal policies as well as external regulations related to data privacy, security, and protection. It is important for organizations to assess the risks associated with remote work and put in place appropriate measures to secure sensitive data, such as using secure virtual private networks (VPNs), two-factor authentication, and encrypted communication.

Such risks can include data privacy breaches where remote workers may access sensitive company data from unsecured or personal devices, increasing the risk of data breaches. Cybersecurity threats, where remote workers may be more susceptible to phishing attacks and other forms of cybercrime. Or when remote work becomes more difficult to ensure compliance with data protection laws and regulations, such as GDPR and HIPAA (aka non-compliance with regulations). Then loss of control over data as with remote work, it may be harder for organizations to monitor and control the access and usage

of company data. Last unauthorized access bearing the risk of remote workers sharing login credentials or leave their devices unattended, increasing the risk of unauthorized access to sensitive data.

## **H2 concluding new scientific statement #4**

*Empathy and optimism from management is crucial in successfully transitioning to remote work during the pandemic. Management should lead by example and actively participate in the change process to ensure it is embraced by the organization.*

This thesis investigated as well on management support throughout the pandemic which led to the above conclusion that it is essential for management to approach change with much empathy and optimism, as helps employees feel supported and understood during the process and uncertainty. Empathy allows management to understand the perspective and feelings of employees and address their concerns, while optimism helps to keep everyone focused on the positive aspects of the change and the benefits it brings. This statement relates to the first statement, as clear and consistent communication can help employees feel informed and included in the decision-making process and can also help manage expectations and alleviate anxiety.

Empathy is also closely connected with active listening; therefore, management is advised to encouraging open communication and actively listening to the concerns and suggestions of employees can help build trust and foster a more positive work environment. It also includes being open to new ideas and approaches and allowing employees to work in a way that suits them best can help increase engagement and productivity. Demonstrating the desired behaviours and attitudes (through management) can set the tone for the rest of the team and help drive a positive transition.

### **H3 concluding new scientific statement #5**

*It needs further use of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, or other immersive technologies to create a sense of presence and connection among team members working remotely.*

Remote working will continue to be a part of the future of work. It has become more prevalent in recent years due to advances in technology that have made it easier for people to communicate and collaborate remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend as many companies have had to rapidly shift to remote work to keep their employees safe and maintain business continuity. The transition to the remote / nowhere / home office needs to involve the development of new methods and technologies that enable more effective and efficient communication and collaboration among remote team members even within different time-zones.

The development of sophisticated and partially automated project management tools that allow remote teams to stay organized and on track will be supportive of this new continuous movement.

It will also have to also include the use of advanced analytics and data visualization techniques to identify key drivers of employee engagement and motivation, or the use of machine learning algorithms to predict how different groups of employees are likely to respond to specific changes.

### **H3 concluding new scientific statement #6**

*Organizations must find and define a suitable balance between remote and in-person work, with hybrid models becoming more common and still providing space for people to return to the physical office.*

Many companies have found that remote work can be just as productive as working in an office and has benefits such as cost savings, better work-life balance, and the ability to hire and retain top talent from a wider geographic area. Many employees have also found that they prefer the flexibility and autonomy that comes with remote work.

However, it is important to raise that remote working may not be suitable for all types of jobs or for all employees. Some employees prefer the social interaction and structure of an office environment, and some jobs may require a more hands-on approach that is difficult to replicate remotely.

## CONCLUSION

The rise of remote work has presented new challenges to organizations in terms of managing and engaging employees. By understanding and addressing different perspectives of change organizational, individual, and cultural, managers can create more effective and efficient strategies for handling remote teams. Clear and consistent communication, transparency, and an overall change management plan are key to reducing uncertainty, building trust and engagement among employees, and mitigating resistance to change. The use of advanced analytics and technology can support in understanding and managing employee engagement and motivation.

It is difficult to state if all organizations are adequately equipped and structured to deal with the challenges of the future, as it depends on the specific further technical and employee development of an organization. Many have been forced to adapt to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic and had to quickly implement new technologies and processes to support a remote workforce. Measuring any kind of productivity of remote working employees will become an interesting topic for future research.

As the world becomes more digitized, organizations require to focus even more on cybersecurity and data privacy to protect their and customer assets, but also ensure data is remotely secure with their employees. It will need for organizations to stay even more up to date with latest technologies and trends to be able to adapt to potential threats.

As the future of work will continue to be shaped by augmented technologies and data analytics, there is a risk that certain jobs may become automated, leading to potential job displacement or redundancy. It will be interesting to see how organizations consider supporting

their employees through this transition and to have plans in place to upskill and reskill their workforce to adapt to the changing nature of work and how much this requires an on-site attendance versus a remote one.

The trend towards remote work is very much going to continue, and organizations will have to ensure they have right technology, processes, and culture in place to support this shift. It is vital to recognize that remote work is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and it is important to find the right balance between remote and on-site work.

Organizations need to offer a flexible work environment that allows employees to make choices that work best for them, while businesses will need to ensure their competitiveness maintains, as they will find part of their workforce in remote locations. A significant aspect is not only to consider technical development, but also to provide employees with the necessary resources and support to maintain their mental and physical well-being while working remotely.

The future of work is likely to be shaped by a combination of technology, data analytics, organizational strategy, and a culture of employee well-being. Organizations will certainly need to be agile and adaptive to stay competitive and to meet the changing needs and expectations of their employees.

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