REMOTE WORK AND EMPLOYEES' WELLBEING IN SERVICE SECTOR IN WEST AFRICA

Babatunde Ayoola Fajimi
Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan
babatundefajimi@yahoo.com
+2348068887102

Abstract
The study explored employees' wellbeing in remote work and described employees' perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in remote work environment in the service sector in West Africa. The study adopted exploratory research design and sampled participants using convenience sampling techniques. Frequency counts and percentages were used to describe demographic characteristics of the respondents and qualitative data collected from self-designed open-ended questionnaires were analysed, coded and categorised manually with safe work, work-life balance and job security themes to describe employees wellbeing. The study concluded that remote work negatively affected employees' perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in remote work environment. Organisations in the service sector should develop policies for remote work and promote remote work as a sub-culture within the context of a larger organisational culture, work climate and digitisation. They should create a hybrid work environment with structures and incentives to align their shift from traditional worksites to remote work with employees wellbeing to promote employees' positive perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in a remote work environment in the service sector in West Africa.

Keywords: Remote Work, Employees' Wellbeing, Safe Work, Work-Life Balance, Job Security

Introduction
Remote work has become commonplace since the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 as organisations increasingly allow their employees to work away from their traditional work environment. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) alluded to 2020 as unprecedented in the history of industrial relations practice with consequences for enterprise competitiveness and employees' wellbeing (ILO, 2020). Lockdown, quarantines, and restrictions of social gatherings have significantly challenged not only organisational productivity but raised concerns about employees' wellbeing in organisations.

The ILO estimated that 68 of global workforce and 81 of employers were affected by the lockdown from Quarter 1 (Q1) 2020. Twenty per cent of employees worked remotely before the pandemic but in Q4 2020, more than 70 were fully engaged in remote work (Siripurapu, 2020). Remote work has become a staple from the technological

novelty of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). It is still being learnt and systematised to create a standardised workplace for organisations in developed and developing countries (Rigotti, Yang, Jiang, Newman, Cuyper and Sekiguchi, 2021; Baruch 2020; Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker, 2020). Organisations with heterogenous global workforce in the service sector which offer intangible products, goods and services to their customers (Britannica, 2018) asked their employees to work remotely (Farr, 2020).

Any time there is a paradigm in the evolution of work, there is always a concern about employees' wellbeing. This has been the case from the hunting and gathering society through the agricultural society and merchant capitalism to the factory system and industrial revolution era (Ajala, 2013). Flexible work arrangements have existed alongside traditional workplace in the last few decades but its benefits to employees' wellbeing have been controversial (Shimura, Yokoi, Ishibashi, Akatsuka and Inoue, 2021). Literature have debated whether the wellbeing of employees in the workplace correlated with remote work demands (O'Hara, 2021; Pfefferbaum and North, 2020; Czeisler, Lane, Petrosky, Wiley, Christensen, and Njai, et al 2020; Steidelmuller, Meyer and Muller, 2020; Aronsson, Gustafsson and Dallner, 2020).

St. John Paul II in the 1981 encyclical Laborem Exercens which emphasised that elements of decent work should not be jeopardised by continual technological advances because human work is central to social order, and policy framework should be adopted to protect work, family and the community (Rubio, 2021). Robertson and Mosier (2020) surmised that employees have been asked to work from home since the emergence of COVID-19 without support for workstation, safe work environment, and psychosocial wellbeing (Lohrmann, 2018). As remote work becomes mainstream, there is a need to explore the challenges of safe work, work-life balance and job security which are indices of employees' wellbeing in the workplace (Okpechi, 2021; Lund, Madgavkar, Manyika and Smit, 2020). This study explored employees' wellbeing in remote work and described employees' perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in remote work environment.

Conceptual Clarifications of Remote Work

There is no universally acceptable definition of remote work (ILO, 2020) but there are two approaches to conceptualise remote work (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). Scholars use technical terminologies ranging from teleworking, telecommuting, distributed work, virtual work, flexiwork, flexiplace, and distance work to colloquial terminologies like working from home and homeworking based on usage (Onyeukwu, Adeniyi and Amin, 2020). Classical definition is orthodox, and it describes remote work from conceptual abstraction to flexible working arrangement where employees work from home. Functional definition is derived from community of practice which conceives remote work as work activity away from the office.

This is the evolving reality of remote work, and it is more than semantics: employees' perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security lies in the

opaqueness of its conceptual similitude. The idea of remote work is that work could take place in any location away from the office and not necessarily at home. The United States Office of Personnel Management (2013) used remote work interchangeably with telework and described it as "a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position, and other authorised activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work" (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015).

Remote work emerged as technological application to work design in the 1970s. However, increase in research and experiential knowledge from industry practice necessitated a need for clarity of different terminologies in use (Felstead, 1996 in Baruch, 2000). Olson (1987) anticipated the future of work and denoted remote work as telework. The ILO (1996) defined telework as work done by an employee for remuneration in other premises other than the traditional worksite of the employer. Remote work involves the use of technological devices such as mobile phones, emails and other video-enhanced face-to-screen on-line communicative applications.

It can be argued, therefore, that remote work is telework within the organisational context where the employer authorises the employee to work at an approved alternative worksite outside physical work location. This is different from telework by entrepreneurs, work-at-home women, freelancers, contractors and consultants. The characteristics of telework in organisational context emphasizes location and contractual relationship between the employer and the employee. There should be flexibility, use of technology and safe work standards. Remote work can be temporary or permanent, done full-time or part-time basis. These characteristics have implications for safe work, work-life balance and job security hence the need for a governance framework and organisational policy guidelines for employees.

Employees' Wellbeing in Remote Work Environment

Employees' wellbeing in the workplace is concerned with employees' perception of their work, its environment, work organisation and climate, and all aspect of working life ranging from employee-influenced factors such as work-life balance, safety at work, job satisfaction and job security to organisation-induced factors such as quality and safety of the physical environment and policies to enhance their attainment (ILO, 2020). Organisations put structure in place for employees' wellbeing so that employees will feel safe, healthy, fulfilled and secured in the process of enriching the values of the organisations and growing their careers for organisational effectiveness and productivity.

Employees want to feel safe. They want to be in control of their lives and work. They want assurance that they will continue to have their work for as long as they are contributing to the growth and productivity of their organisations. Although organisations push for innovations to remain competitive, employees want a degree of stability and predictability of organisational culture and workplace climate. Remote work creates a disequilibrium which exposes employees to vulnerable working conditions and

increase their level of uncertainties about their work, health and the work environment (Sandoval-Reyes, Idrovo-Carlier and Duque-Oliva, 2021).

The World Health Organisation (2010) template for a healthy workplace describes a safe physical work environment with concerns for psychosocial work environment, organisation of work and workplace culture (Alford, Lynch, Rosenblum and Kullmann, 2014). The Labour Act makes necessary provisions for employees' right to safe and healthy working conditions (Utami, 2020). Onyeukwu, Adeniyi and Amin (2020) conducted a study on telework as strategy to promote safe work in Nigerian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study sampled 119 respondents involving 36 lecturers and 83 students using mixed methods. Findings of the study showed that the use of telework tools such as on-line teachings through the internet and social media enhanced social distancing and negative correlation on community spread of COVID-19. The study recommended that government should adopt telework in the education sector for uninterrupted academic activities.

Service Sector
The service sector, otherwise known as services sector (Asian Development Bank, 2021) or tertiary sector (Siegfried, 2013) is tier of the economy that is involved in the creation of services that deliver intangible goods and services to people in the society (Britannica, 2018). The sector comprises of banking, non-banking financial services, information and communication technology, hospitality, healthcare, logistics, transportation, consulting, outsourcing and other professional services. The service sector accounts for three-fifths of global gross domestic product (GDP). The sector pervades the economy of developed countries but globalisation, market liberalisation and internet are increasing its role in developing countries such as the sub-Saharan Africa economic block. The sector is the largest in GDP and employment in developed, emerging and developing economies (Cuadrado-Roura, 2016). African Development Bank (2018) asserted that the service sector is the dominant sector in West Africa because the sector contributes most to the gross domestic product (GDP) in the key countries in Anglophone (English speaking) West Africa countries namely The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria.

West Africa
West Africa is a geographical region in sub-Saharan Africa that is located west of north-south axis lying close to 10° east longitude (ECOWAS, 2016). The region is economic block comprising of 15 countries known as the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) which was founded in 1975 to promote cooperation and integration of member-states in the areas of commerce and trade, monetary and financial services, transportation, telecommunication, energy and cultural affairs (African Union, 2022; Britannica, 2015). The 15 countries with an Anglophone (English speaking) and Francophone (French speaking) colonial histories occupy 3.4 of habitable area around the world with an estimated population of 397 million people and an annual GDP of

US$683,722 million. The Anglophone West African countries are The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria and part of Cameroon (Gut, 2013) while others are Francophone.

Methodology

The study adopted depth interview which is an exploratory research design method blended with descriptive survey method because it enabled the researcher to examine the real-life context of the relationship between the variables and focus on the interpretative nature of the study. The sample of the population consisted of all 30 participants drawn from English-speaking West Africa countries and Cameroon obtained through convenience sampling technique. The self-designed instrument measured employees' perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in remote work environment with 15 open-ended questions. The questionnaires were administered using Google form, Whatsapp chat and email. The study carried out a pilot study of five participants (not part of the 30 participants) selected through snowballing sampling technique in Lagos, Nigeria to ascertain the validity of the instrument. Minor corrections were made, and the title of the instrument was changed to Remote Work and Employees' Wellbeing in the Service Sector Scale (RWEWSSS) to reflect the feedback from the pilot study. The data collected were analysed through descriptive statistics for Section A using frequency counts and percentage, and thematic analysis for Section B which was manually coded and categorised using MSExcel and MSWord software applications with themes to measure safe work, work-life balance and job security of employees in remote work environment (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

Results

Section A: Descriptive Analysis of Quantitative Data

The study used descriptive statistics to analyse the demographic characteristics of the respondents and simple percentage scores for the responses on the status of remote work in the organisations and employees' familiarity with the phenomenon prior to emergence of COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Country	Frequency	Percentage
Gambia	3	10.00
Ghana	5	16.67
Liberia	3	10.00
Nigeria	10	33.33
Sierra Leone	5	16.67
Cameroon	4	13.33
Total	30	100
Industry	**Frequency**	**Percentage**

Banking	2	6.67
Non-banking Financial Services	4	13.33
ICT	5	16.67
Hospitality	4	13.33
Logistics	4	13.33
Outsourcing	6	20.00
Consulting	5	16.67
Total	30	100
Position	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Senior Management Cadre	8	26.67
Middle Management Cadre	18	60.00
Junior Management Cadre	4	13.33
Total	30	100
Gender	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Female	6	20.00
Male	24	80.00
Total	30	100
Age	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
➢ 50 years	15	50.0
40 – 49 years	10	33.3
30 – 39 years	5	16.7
Total	30	100

Participants drawn from Gambia (n = 3; 10), Ghana (n = 5; 16.7), Liberia (n = 3, 10), Nigeria (n = 10, 33.3), Sierra Leone (n = 5, 16.7) and Cameroon (n = 4, 13.3) who are female (n = 6, 20) and male (n = 24, 80) and aged 30-39 years (n = 5, 16.7), 40-49 years (n = 10, 33.3) and over 50 years (n = 15, 50) in junior management cadre (n = 4, 13.3), middle management cadre (n = 18, 60) and senior management cadre (n = 8, 26.7) worked in banking (n = 2, 6.7), non-banking financial services (n = 4, 13.3), ICT (n = 5, 16.7), hospitality (n = 4, 13.3), logistics (n = 4, 13.3), outsourcing (n = 5, 16.7) and consulting service industry (n = 5, 16.7) of the service sector across Anglophone West African countries and Cameroon.

Table 2: Status of Remote Work and Employees' Familiarity in Organisations

Items	SA	A	D	SD
Familiarity with teleworking or Working from Home (WFH) prior to COVID-19 pandemic	6.7	20.0	33.3	40.0
Remote work is a novelty in the organisation	63.3	13.3	16.7	6.7

The organisation has a policy framework for remote work	3.3	13.3	36.7	46.7

Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A); Disagree (D); Strongly Disagree (SD)

Table 2 showed that remote work as conceptualised in this study is an innovation in the workplace (76.6; 23.4) as only 26.7 of the employees are familiar with teleworking or Working from Home (WFH) relative to 73.3 of the employees who are used to working in their traditional worksites prior to COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicated that 83.4 of organisations do not have a policy framework to guide implementation of remote work in the workplace compared to 16.6 who have instituted policies for remote work in their environment.

Section B: Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data
The findings of the study showed employees' perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in the remote work environment. These results were presented under three themes namely safe work, work-life balance and job security

Remote Work and Safe Work
The results of the study showed that respondents feel that working remotely has an adverse effect on their perception of safe work because they are not working from their traditional worksite where rules of engagement regarding occupational health and safety are in place and implemented. Although, working away from the traditional worksites enabled them to comply fully with the physical distancing requirements during the peak of COVID-19 lockdown, they cannot say confidently that the situation holds again because employees have not been careful to comply with safe work regulations such as dressing appropriately and keeping work areas uncluttered or use of intoxicants (intoxicating beverages and/or drugs) when they work away from their traditional worksites.

Table 3: Remote Work and Safe Work

Question: How has remote work affected your perception of safe work in the workplace?					
Country	**Industry**	**Position**	**Age**	**Gender**	**Respondent's Reaction**
Nigeria	Outsourcing	MM	40-49	Female	I am more productive working in the office than working remotely as my concentration in the office is very high.
Cameroon	Hospitality	MM	40-49	Female	Feeling safe at work is not just a mental accent. It involves the institutionalisation of the right occupational health and safety policies to guide employees. As leaders, it behoves us to put measures in place to ensure that employees comply with these safe work guidelines.
Ghana	Hospitality	MM	40-49	Male	I cannot cope with the mental disorientation of not working around my familiar and predictable work space and my team. I am still wrapping my head around recreating similar space away from work – it is draining and not safe for my mental wellness.
Liberia	Outsourcing	SM	>50	Male	I'm more productive working in my physical office environment because of conduciveness and availability of working tools.
Nigeria	Logistics	MM	40-49	Male	Working remotely these days is like managing two homes; your office at work and this unpredictable mobile office that you have to work from at short notice. The sense of comfort and safety is a challenge I grapple with here.
Sierra Leone	Outsourcing	SM	30-39	Female	I feel a sense of safety when I work from the comforts of my office. I am familiar with the space and mentally I reckon with it as my work space. Working away from the office gives me concerns because I have to worry about creating familiar work environment where I will not trip over furniture, spill my tea, or expose my unofficial dressing mistakenly on zoom during meetings.
Key: SM – Senior Management; MM – Middle-level Management; JM – Junior Management					

Remote Work and Work-Life Balance

The results of the study showed that employees' perceptions about work-life balance in remote work environment in organisations are positively or negatively construed. Whilst some of the respondents say that working remotely is fraught with unproductive and unmeasurable activities, others find it stimulating. Work and domestic conflicts, environmental distractions, data volume consumption, non-accessibility to work tools and limitations to teamwork are some of the issues raised by most of the respondents.

Table 4: Remote Work and Work-Life Balance

Question: How has remote work affected your perception of work-life balance in the workplace?					
Country	**Industry**	**Position**	**Age**	**Gender**	**Respondent's Reaction**
Ghana	Non-banking financial services	SM	>50	Female	Working with technology is the challenge with remote work. There is a new level of stress I face with long hours of using the phone or digital device. I have added weight sitting down for long hours at home. Our social interactions and team bonding have been adversely affected and having to socialise on the web requires a new skill sets that are the domains of the Millennials
Liberia	ICT	JM	30-39	Male	I'm productive at home
Nigeria	ICT	SM	>50	Male	It is actually accelerating work-life balance because employees have flexible work hours to attend to personal issues of life and apparently taking off the rigidity and fatigue of routine work activities
Nigeria	Non-banking financial services	MM	40-49	Male	Accountability should be a prerequisite for remote work
Sierra Leone	Logistics	MM	40-49	Male	For me, remote work compounds things. Rather than make things easier, it has increased our workload and extended the frontiers of work from the office to the home. If not effectively managed, our social and family life will be endangered. No more privacy. Before, I can leave my work in the office and go home. Now, with technology, I am exposed to work 24/7. Where is the work-life balance
Key: SM – Senior Management; MM – Middle-level Management; JM – Junior Management					

Remote Work and Job Security

The study showed that respondents perceive that high probability of job loss and sense of low job security permeate remote work environment. Respondents think that organisations should upscale employees' skills to adapt to remote work and absorb its job security shock in remote work environment.

Table 5: Remote Work and Job Security

Question: How has remote work affected your perception of job security in the workplace?					
Country	**Industry**	**Position**	**Age**	**Gender**	**Respondent's Reaction**
Nigeria	Outsourcing	MM	>50	Male	Remote work exposes a great issue on redundancy as many employees have the tendency of losing the relevance of their positions because of virtual interfacing
Cameroon	Consulting	SM	>50	Male	Employees can now easily be replaced to reduce work duplicity and increase efficiency
Gambia	Banking	JM	30-39	Male	The future of work is remote work. I am concerned about my continued retention. I am worried about being redundant.
Liberia	Consulting	SM	>50	Male	As a CEO, my employees are more important because without them I don't have an organisation. I work with them as a team to eliminate threats to their job satisfactions and job security. We are an innovative organisation but if our work environment will give my team a sense of loss rather than growth, I will refrain from promoting a remote work. We are a family – physically or virtually
Nigeria	Outsourcing	MM	40-49	Male	Digitisation enhances work effectiveness and makes employees more productive
Sierra Leone	Banking	MM	30-39	Male	Some jobs are not suited for remote work. Once implemented, the jobholders will lose to automation and digitisation. In our organisation, we are already thinking about this foreseeable future and planning the consequences for our categories of employees who may be affected by this reality
Key: SM – Senior Management; MM – Middle-level Management; JM – Junior Management					

Discussions

The study has explored the concepts of remote work and how employees' wellbeing can be shaped by its practice in the organization. The study corroborates previous studies by scholars that employees' perceptions of their safe work, work-life balance and job security are circumscribed by the introduction of remote work in the organisation within the context of their wellbeing in the workplace. Sandoval-Reyes, Idrovo-Carlier and Duque-Oliva (2021) surveyed 1285 respondents and found that remote work increased perceived stress, reduced work-life balance and work satisfaction but increased productivity and engagement. Juchnowicz and Kinowska (2021) studied 1,000 Polish workers and found that working wholly remotely negatively affected wellbeing in terms of workplace relationships and work-life balance, although, the study could not establish

significant relationship between remote work and subjective health assessment. The study recommended hybrid work arrangements for the management of employees' wellbeing in remote working settings.

This study underscores organisational context because it can be inferred that respondents' demographic characteristics influenced employees' perceptions of their wellbeing which were categorised into three main themes of safe work, work-life balance and job security. This context highlights the imperative of organisational culture and submit that remote work environment is a sub-culture within the broader context of organisational culture and climate determining employees' perceptions. Lee (2018) said that organisations should weave remote work sub-culture to their organisational culture context to create a hybrid culture system that cater to the needs of traditional worksite and tele-work environment. The implementation of organisational policy will mitigate any adverse effects of remote work on safe work, work-life balance and job security as perceived by employees in the workplace. This is corroborated by Atoko (2021) who suggested that organizations should have remote work policies to concretise the positive relationship that the study established between remote work and employee performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Remote work has negatively affected employees' perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in the service industry in West Africa. Employees work away from their traditional worksite where they feel more comfortable and occupational health, safety and environment (OHSE) regulations are in place. There is a mental disorientation that comes with working away from environment where employees are familiar with, and this creates concerns for mental wellness. Employees spend long hours on their digital devices for work and this affects their ability to achieve work-life balance. Remote work has heightened concerns about redundancy and elimination of routine jobs because of automation. Although some jobs may not be suited for remote work in the present scheme of things, but employees' perception that the foreseeable future of work is remote work portends concerns about job security in the service sector. Remote work is ubiquitous and changing the face of work as employees experience remote work environment. The employees' wellbeing is sacrosanct as the organisations evolve work climate and organisational culture that enhance employees' positive perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in the service sector in West Africa.

Organisations should promote remote work as a sub-culture within the context of its larger organisational culture and work digitisation by aligning their remote work policy expectations with employees' wellbeing strategies for the remote work environment. To do otherwise is to put the cart before the horse, and conflict is bound to ensue. Change is constant, and the world keeps evolving. It is the employees who are the source of the organisation's competitive advantage that will remain constant. Organisations should keep innovating but people-focused to create an environment where employees can adapt to challenges of remote work. Policies, processes and

procedures on remote work should be developed and employees given on-the-job training on their roles, job standards and expectations for safe work, work-life balance and job security in the workplace. Organisations should implement remote work in phases through a hybrid of traditional worksites and remote work with structures and incentives to enable employees acclimatise with the shift from traditional workplace to remote work to promote employees' wellbeing and their positive perception of safe work, work-life balance and job security in a remote work environment in the service sector in West Africa.

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