Whether Managing at a Distance Demands a More Bureaucratic Approach

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During the pandemic, working styles of people have changed significantly. More and more companies tried to let their employees to work remotely. The remote working pattern could contribute to job satisfaction; however, it also brings some management problems. Despite some advantages, managers are not in favour of the remote working pattern due to management challenges which may lead to reduction of work efficiency and quality. Managers' reluctancy is reasonable because the remote working pattern has brought challenges to traditional management approaches. It seems that a more bureaucratic management approach can perfectly solve the challenges under remote work pattern. However, managing this way will also cause some problems: When under a more bureaucratic management, remote workers perceive less job autonomy, and thus cannot buffer the strain imposed by their job demand. It seems strange that using more strict rules to cope with lack of supervision and control cannot solve the problem effectively and even bring more problems. The fact is that the challenges essentially may not be the problem for remote work pattern. Remote work pattern should be given more autonomy rather than more strict roles; a less bureaucratic, more collaborative and transformational approach is needed. This kind of management approach has been proven to be a more effective management method when they work remotely. Therefore, managing at a distance does not demand a more bureaucratic approach; instead, a less bureaucratic approach is needed.

Keywords: remote work, bureaucratic management, work autonomy

Introduction

Under the influence of quarantines, lockdowns, and self-imposed isolation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of people all over the world have to adopt remote working. Even now that people have gradually returned to the workplace, a survey from McKinsey shows that a considerable number of employees will maintain the hybrid model of remote work (Lund, Madgavkar, Manyika, & Smit, 2020). Remote work is a flexible work arrangement of companies which allows employees to work from home and have a high degree of autonomy in their working hours. Owing to more work autonomy, research believes that remote work can help employees to balance work and life, and relieve their pressure caused by longer commutes, thereby contributing to job satisfaction improvement (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Nevertheless, this way of working also brings some management challenges derived from the lack of direct supervision (Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012). This problem seems to be solved by a more bureaucratic approach. This study will argue

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critically that managing remote workers does not demand a more bureaucratic approach; a less bureaucratic one is needed instead. This study will firstly discuss the management challenges under remote work pattern. Following this, it will discuss advantages and disadvantages of the more bureaucratic approach to solve challenges. This study will finally explain that the challenges are not the problem.

Management Challenges Under Remote Work Pattern

Despite some advantages, managers are not in favour of the remote working pattern due to management challenges which may lead to reduction of work efficiency and quality. Remote work can reduce transportation costs, save transportation time, ease work-family conflicts, and meet the employees' needs for independence and freedom; for organisations, remote work can reduce operating costs and employee turnover rates, and improve organisational performance (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Despite its various advantages, managers are still reluctant to manage online subordinates. Studies have shown that managers are not keen on implementing remote work, and it is more of a non-standardised work arrangement. In many organisations, not all employees have the permit to work remotely. This permit depends on the employee's organisational status, individual value, and trustworthiness (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Donnelly, 2006). Even with the formation of institutionalised remote work arrangements, in terms of implementation of related policies, organisations still rely on the discretion of managers to screen remote employees; because of fear of losing control, organisations often choose trustworthy employees (Kelly & Kalev, 2006; Lautsch, Kossek, & Eaton, 2009).

Managers' reluctancy is reasonable because the remote working pattern has brought challenges to traditional management approaches. They are mainly concerned about the problem of control and supervision. One study confirmed that although remote work can bring some benefits to the organisations, managers are still worried about the effectiveness of employee control and performance appraisal under this work pattern, which makes them reluctant to implement remote work in their organisations (Mahler, 2012). Bailey and Kurland (2002) also argued that managers doubt when their supervision and control are absent, whether employees can be as productive as in a traditional office. The production, as well as work efficiency and quality, may truly decrease under remote management pattern. When employees work from home, managers cannot communicate face-to-face with subordinates, or use on-site supervision to understand the work status and progress of employees. Unlike traditional office spaces, managers cannot even know whether their subordinates who work from home are working or doing something unrelated to work. Due to the lack of direct and on-site supervision from managers, remote workers are prone to slackness, forming procrastinated work styles and lazy habits, which reduces work efficiency and quality.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the More Bureaucratic Approach Under Challenges

It seems that a more bureaucratic management approach can perfectly solve the challenges under remote work pattern. Weber summarised the main characteristics of the bureaucracy: reasonable division of labour within the organisation; hierarchical control of power system; rules and regulations based working mechanism; formal decision-making system depending on documents rather than verbal communication; impersonalisation of organisational management; professional training mechanism that meets the needs of the work; reasonable and legal personnel administrative system. The superiority of bureaucratic management is embodied in its strictness, rationality, stability, and universality (Weber & Kalberg, 2013; Weber, 2019). From the perspective of the characteristics of bureaucracy, bureaucratic management could be able to solve the problem of managers'

control over employees under the remote work pattern. Under a reasonable division of labour, remote workers are assigned different tasks to prevent buck-passing. Under hierarchical control of power and formal decision-making documents, remote workers with no autonomy report their work progress to their superiors and obtain permission from their managers before making any decisions. On the surface, remote workers only need to do things under the orders of their line managers; employees at each level do their assigned tasks. The organisation has formulated strict rules and regulations to clarify the responsibilities of different employees so that managers can control and supervise their employees. In reality, will this management approach be effective?

Managing this way will also cause some problems. Webber pointed out the weaknesses of bureaucratic management is that the bureaucracy is like a huge iron cage, restraining the enthusiasm and creativity of people who are stuck in it (Hoogenboom & Ossewaarde, 2005). Remote employees under a more bureaucratic management system have become an accessory of the organisation, and they can only complete tasks in accordance with the instructions of their superiors without discretion and autonomy. However, autonomy is essential to employees, especially when they work remotely. According to job demand control model, job demand and job autonomy are the main factors that affect employees' work psychology and behaviour. Job demand refers to workloads, conflicts, and other pressure sources in work situations. It stimulates the individual's work motivation and produces strain. Job autonomy refers to the degree to which employees perceive their own work. It has a buffering effect on the negative effects of demand (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011). According to different combinations of demand and autonomy, jobs can be divided into four types. When under a more bureaucratic management, remote workers perceive less job autonomy, and thus cannot buffer the strain imposed by their job demand. They would feel stronger job burnout and emotional exhaustion, and are more likely to produce deviant behaviour.

Challenges Are Not the Problem

It seems strange that using more strict rules to cope with lack of supervision and control cannot solve the problem effectively and even bring more problems. The fact is that the challenges essentially may not be the problem for remote work pattern. The features and suitable positions of remote work show that remote workers need autonomy, who do not demand much supervision and control. Research on remote work based on interviews with three remote workers (clerks, professionals, managers) shows that remote work positions have some major characteristics: flexibility in working rhythm, need for concentration, and relatively little communication needs (Olson, 1983). These features indicate that remote workers need more autonomy when working because they need to focus on their work without much interruption. Studies have also shown that remote office is particularly suitable for highly autonomous work with very complex tasks which relies on trust for management (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997). Manoochehri and Pinkerton (2003) also believed that remote work is suitable for job positions with higher flexibility and less supervision. Batenburg and Peters (2005) put forward work autonomy as a criterion to judge whether a job position is suitable for working from home. According to this logic, remote work pattern should be given more autonomy rather than more strict roles; a less bureaucratic, more collaborative and transformational approach is needed.

This kind of management approach has been proven to be a more effective management method when they work remotely. Empirical studies have confirmed that organisational support and leadership behaviour can indirectly affect employee behaviour by changing employees' perceptions of their roles (Hui, Lee, & Wang,

2015). According to the reciprocity mechanism of social exchange theory, when individuals are favoured by others (such as being empowered or delegated), individuals often respond through positive attitude and behaviour. In this process, individual cognition and emotions are particularly important mediating factors (Chen & Aryee, 2007). Therefore, those remote workers who are permitted by the organisation to carry out full autonomy will perceive the organisation's support and recognition of them. In return, they will obey the requirements of their job roles and consciously abide by organisational norms, and show strong willingness to work beyond the scope of their duties and show a high degree of professionalism (Gajendran, Harrison, & Delaney-Klinger, 2015). Moreover, job demand control model can be used again to support this method. Baillien et al. (2011) argued that improving employees' job autonomy can reduce the pressure and strain caused by high work requirements, and increase employees' internal motivation and initiative at work, thereby reducing the occurrence of production deviant behaviour. The research of Gajendran et al. (2015) and Sardeshmukh, Sharma, and Golden (2012) also believes that work autonomy, as a key work resource, can buffer the emotional exhaustion, job burnout, and pressure perception caused by high work requirements so that employees feel energetic and have more dedication, and be more responsible for their work.

Further, the study of Chen and Aryee (2007) points out that by giving employees greater work autonomy, organisations can also significantly improve employees' perception of insider identity and produce positive results. Chen and Aryee (2007) believed that giving employees work autonomy can cultivate a good employment relationship among members of the organisation, and improve employees' awareness of their status as in-group members. By granting more decision-making autonomy to subordinates, leaders can make employees feel valued and trusted by the organisation, thus reducing their negative behaviour and promoting their positive behaviour (Raub & Robert, 2010). Granting remote workers more autonomy, allowing them to make independent decisions and assume appropriate responsibilities can have a positive impact on their perception of their identity. Also, the practice of enterprises can also better support this approach. Some tech companies nowadays regard remote work as a flexible workplace response in the context of pandemic, and claim to continue this working pattern. Shopify is a good example. This multinational e-commerce company headquartered in Canada announced in 2020 that it would close its office and shift to a working-from-home pattern (Kelly, 2020). Employees in this company are given full autonomy. This company advocates a collaborative and transformational management style (Elliot, 2020). Shopify's remote work practices have confirmed that a management approach that emphasises empowerment and autonomy can improve employees' perception of support from their managers, effectively increase their working efficiency, and improve their working engagement.

Conclusion

To sum up, managing at a distance does not demand a more bureaucratic approach; instead, a less bureaucratic approach is needed. Under the condition of COVID-19 pandemic, remote work pattern is used worldwide, leading to some management challenges for mangers. They are worried that they cannot monitor and control their employees on-site for their working hours, work progress, and performance in the remote work context. A bureaucratic approach may help them solve this problem through more strict rules; however, some more severe problems are brought. This is because the challenges are not the real problem; essentially, remote work demands autonomy which is opposite to the bureaucratic management. Therefore, a less bureaucratic approach is needed, which is proved to be an effective approach by theories and practice. In the

future, when managing employees who work remotely, managers could give them appropriate autonomy, which will help ease the rigid bureaucratic management form and enhance the flexibility of organisational management. To do this, they could reduce the top-down management level and establish a trusting organisational culture; therefore each member of the organisation has a high degree of autonomy, independent management, and independent responsibility.

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