



# COVID 19 Accelerating Workplace Restructuring and Remote Working Strategies

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**Abstract:** The study sought to understand how COVID 19 has accelerated workplaces to restructure for the 4IR's digital economy and remote working strategies. The snapshot research study used electronic individual interviews with employees from five different organisations in various sectors on how organisations have changed operations and communication techniques amid the COVID 19 lockdown period in South Africa, which came into effect from the 27 March 2020. A total of fifteen employees participated in the study, open-ended questions were used from interview schedule guide. The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were communicated as well as observed in the undertaking of the research project and the informed consent of the research participants was obtained. The findings of the research study indicated that indeed the employees, employers and organisations had to restructure operations and patterns as well as adopt remote working strategies to manage and prevent the spread of COVID 19 in their workplaces.

**Keywords:** COVID 19, 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution, Digital economy, Remote Work Strategies

## Introduction

According to Bolsen, Palm and Kingsland (2020:1), COVID 19 is an acute respiratory syndrome caused by a novel coronavirus (Cov-2).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID 19 as a global pandemic crisis on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 after the virus spread from the Chinese province of Wuhan in mid-December 2019, (Holshue, De Bolt, Lindquist & Lofy, 2020:2).

By the time, the WHO declared COVID 19 as a global pandemic, there were 118 000 cases in 114 countries and 4291 people had lost their lives due to the virus infection (Liang, 2020:1).

Relying on historical data of a similar outbreak in 1918-1919, known as the Spanish Influenza which was best managed by periods of quarantine, countries began with social distancing and quarantine strategies known as lockdowns (Voxeu, 2020:5).

Lockdown meant that only essential services such as food, basic clothing, medicine and utility services will operate and the rest of the many as well as social activities were shut down (Gatner, 2020: 4). Lockdowns brought to the fore the need for the implementation and practice of remote working (Kemlu; 2020:1)

South African's lockdown came into effect on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 and adopted a risk assessment as well as risk adjustment strategy to the lockdown as time progressed.

This strategy included remote work guidance for the workplace. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2020, the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) released Circular No 8 of 2020, stipulating that workplaces should develop remote working policies and mechanisms (highly considering employees with pre-existing chronic conditions).

Given the aforementioned background, this study aimed to gather understanding on how organisations in South Africa adapted to integrating the digital tools aligned to the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution based economy, to practice social distancing whilst ensuring essential services are rendered and companies stayed afloat with their means of survival, being work.

## Research Question

The research question of study was:-

- How has COVID 19 accelerated workplace restructuring for the 4IR's digital economy and remote working strategies?

## Research Objectives

The research objectives for this study were:-

- To explore and describe how COVID-19 accelerated workplace restructuring for the 4IR's digital economy and remote working strategies in different working environments
- To explain how COVID-19 has accelerated remote working strategies by looking at the employees' working arrangements and experiences of those arrangements since the lockdown process

## Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was utilised in this snapshot research project.

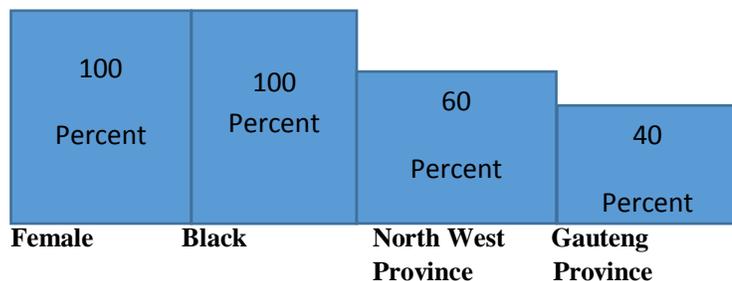
The snapshot research study used electronic individual interviews with employees from five different organisations in various sectors considering how organisations changed operations and communication techniques amid the COVID 19 lockdown period in South Africa, which came into effect from the 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020.



A total of fifteen employees participated in the study, open-ended questions were used from interview schedule guide. The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were communicated as well as observed in the undertaking of the research project and the informed consent of the research participants was obtained.

Respondents were employed in both the public and private sector in diverse field including legal, medical, property, consumer services and energy sectors.

*Demographic profile of research participants:*



**Findings**

The findings of the research study indicated that:-

- Employees, employers and organisations had to restructure operations and working patterns as well as adopt remote working strategies to manage and prevent the spread of COVID 19 in their respective workplaces.
- In as much as many South Africa companies had stuck to the traditional, office based approach of having employees in the office from 8am to 4:30pm,
- 65% of Respondents indicated that lockdown forced organisations and companies to shift focus to productivity, flexible working hours and approaches.
- Above all, lockdown as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, made workplaces enlist digital resources to ensure continued operations, communication and productivity.
- Remote working became a COVID 19 prevention and management mechanism for many companies.
- 80% of Respondents engaged in remote work and only 20% of Respondents from the medical profession did not utilise remote working.
- 50% of Respondents that worked remotely in the public sector found remote work convenient, cost-effective and bearing more output.
- Respondents reported saving on petrol costs, travelling time, buying snacks and lunch at the office.
- Some Respondents used company funded cellphones and laptops through Zoom meetings, emails and Whatsapp groups to carry out their occupational functions.

- Respondents recommend that employers should consider remote working as a permanent strategy to save operational costs of paying rentals, save on the consumption of water and electricity etc.
- 50% of Respondents from the private sector found working from home difficult as Respondents worked in high pressure environments with targets and a strong emphasis on performance in terms of both quantity and quality. As a result the work had the tendency of taking over their households and their entire life.
- Managing work and life balance, became a major challenge.
- Respondents feel that having an office to work from home, separates the private duties from the occupational ones and helps them with balance.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic data analysis was used to make sense of the collected data in the findings. The following three main themes were derived from the research findings:

- Majority of companies were forced by COVID 19 to restructure their workplaces, utilise digital resources and practise remote work strategies.
- Employees in the public sector, used their company funded digital tools to make remote working more productive, convenient and cost-effective.
- Employees in the private sector, particularly in demanding fields such as law profession found remote working as a challenge as it required more discipline and administration for work and life balance.
- Inasmuch as some South African companies stuck to the traditional office based approach of employees in the office from 8am to 4:30pm, these have mostly been manufacturing companies involving lower skilled employees who routinely use less technology as part of normal work output

**Limitations**

Research participants in the research study, are only from two provinces out of the nine province in South Africa. Therefore perhaps if the study was conducted in all the nine provinces, different findings will be made.

All Respondents were black females, if members of the other sex and race groups participated, perhaps the research outcome may differ from the current findings of this snapshot research study.



The implications of the study from the findings are that:

- Further research need to be conducted to understand the widespread experiences in terms of how COVID has accelerated workplace restructuring for the 4IR's digital economy and remote working strategies.
- Some organisations in the public and parastatal sectors may well need to look at remote working as long term strategy to curb administrative and operational costs.

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