



TELEWORKING AS A BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUITY STRATEGY: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ZIMBABWEAN TELECOMMUNICATIONS SECTOR UNDER COVID-19

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has seen unprecedented changes to the way people conduct business and work whilst striving to reduce downtime and maintain or even increase productivity (Belzunegui- Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020). Long lockdown periods and the need to meet World Health Organisation (WHO) regulations for social distancing have necessitated that organisations instruct their employees to telecommute or work remotely from home in an effort to maintain business sustainability and continuity (OECD, 2020). This research explored how Zimbabwean telecommunications companies implemented teleworking as a business sustainability and continuity strategy in the Covid-19 pandemic environment. This study was qualitative in nature, employing a phenomenology philosophy. Thirty knowledgeable telecommunications managers and business leaders were invited to complete a detailed online questionnaire that helped draw conclusions to the objectives. Based on these questionnaires and some secondary data review, this study determined that teleworking was widely adopted by 97% of the telecommunications sector during the Covid-19 pandemic era. The implementation of telework and BCM processes was the required antidote to the decrease in productivity and threats to job security and business continuity presented by lockdowns. Teleworking guaranteed retention of employees, real estate and administrative cost savings, continued business operations and service delivery. In addition, telework helped curb the potential spread of the virus amongst employees and customers who would have congregated at the work place. Inconsistent supply of electricity, inadequate communication and collaboration tools and platforms as well as lack of ergonomic chairs and desks were the major factors indicated to be deterring effective and productive telework. The study also revealed that there was an increased demand for telecommunications products and services

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during the pandemic particularly on lock down periods. This was confirmed by POTRAZ (2021) in their first quarter abridged postal and telecommunications sector performance report. Customers had a new need for reliable internet connections to use when working from home, learning online and for entertainment. The businesses made efforts to ensure that their services were adhering to availability, reliability and dependability standards. There is a great need for the establishment of standards and policies to govern telework and BCM process and policy implementation in telecommunications companies for successful business continuity and sustainability.

Keywords: Teleworking, telecommuting, working from home, Business Continuity Management (BCM), business continuity, telecommunications, sustainability, Covid-19.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented economic disruption and changes to how people work and conduct business. This public health emergency presented a challenge that needed a balanced strategic approach for businesses to safeguard the employees' health whilst ensuring business continuity and sustainability (ILO, 2020). Business Continuity Management (BCM) processes and strategies are there to maintain business continuity and resiliency in the event of unforeseen or unavoidable disasters. The most successful telecommunications companies in Zimbabwe in the Covid-19 era were those that have agile business models and were able to align their business resiliency processes and policies with teleworking or telecommuting measures (Jiles and Nathan, 2020). However, for a telework strategy to yield benefits, it has to have clear policies, processes and a robust and relevant method for implementation and refinement. In the provision of essential service, successful teleworking requires a mutual commitment by employees and employers to ensure preservation of jobs, maintained or even increased productivity.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

On the 27th of March 2020, the government of Zimbabwe gazetted the Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020 declaring COVID-19 a state of disaster. This saw the announcement of a 21 day national lockdown beginning on the 30th of March 2020. Subsequently, some organizations instructed their employees to telecommute or work remotely from home in an effort to maintain business sustainability and continuity. The workforce worldwide has been subjected to an involuntary experiment where workers, companies and organisations have been driven to operate and be a going concern while employees are working from home and physically separated (Abulibdeh, 2020). This has been possible

for employees that can perform their duties without the need of being physically present at the work office. It is also possible for establishments that have the necessary technological, legal and digital security conditions. Teleworking has potentially significant impact on various businesses, whether they have a history of adopting teleworking before the Covid-19 era or not (OECD, 2020).

Advancements in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the digital transformation revolution have altered work and life and afforded people the chance to work from anywhere, anytime. The major businesses in the telecommunications sector in Zimbabwe have knowledge and proficiency in communication systems and the very networks that provide voice, broadband data and other digital services. Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, one of the Mobile Network Operators in Zimbabwe has been marketing its digital services emphasizing that work is not a place but it is what we do.

However, technology is not the only factor that affects the outcomes of teleworking practices. Data protection and security issues present a challenge to teleworking as employees can inadvertently expose sensitive company information and be victims of cyber-attacks. Factors like health and mental well-being, work-life balance, trust and productivity of the employees need to be carefully monitored and managed for successful teleworking (ILO, 2020). In Zimbabwe, the intermittent electricity and water supply might make it difficult for some people to successfully work from home full time.

4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Covid-19 pandemic enforced lock downs and social distancing measures have made telecommunications services essential not only in Zimbabwe but globally. Technology has made it possible for people to be successful in social distancing, working and learning from home and keeping abreast with world news. Hence, there was a need to assess how teleworking and other BCM processes and strategies are helping to maintain business sustainability in the telecoms sector of Zimbabwe.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Basnayake *et al.* (2020) states that people are the top priority in implementing successful teleworking and BCM strategies and processes. If there is a business emergency, teleworking and BCM policies, strategies and processes address the what, when and how questions that help maintain business continuity and

resilience. This study was guided by the conceptual framework in Figure 1 below:

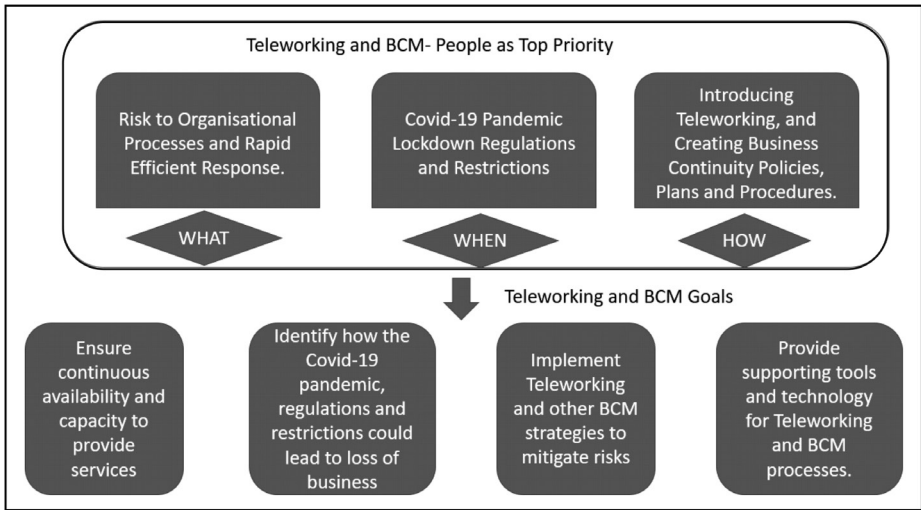


Figure 1: Research Conceptual Framework

Adapted from: (Agrawal, 2019)

People or human resources are a top priority in having an efficient teleworking and sustainable BCM strategy. The Covid-19 pandemic lockdown regulations and restrictions are a risk to organisational processes and capacity of telecommunications companies to ensure continuous availability of digital services. The regulations and restrictions could lead to potential loss of business if teleworking and other BCM strategies are not implemented to mitigate risk and ensure business continuity. All business continuity policies, plans and procedures need to be accompanied by provision of supporting tools and technology for successful teleworking and BCM processes.

6. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was guided by the following research questions.

- To what extent did the telecommunication sector in Zimbabwe implement teleworking and BCM processes to mitigate risks posed by covid-19 pandemic?
- To what extent did the telecommunication sector in Zimbabwe provide supporting tools and technology for teleworking and BCM processes during covid-19 pandemic?

To what extent were teleworking and BCM processes ensuring continuous availability and capacity to provide services in the telecommunication sector in Zimbabwe during covid- 19 pandemic?

What strategies should be put in place to ensure that teleworking and BCM processes are effective during a pandemic?

7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that guided this research was the phenomenological framework. The study searched for the reality from the narratives of telecommunications' professionals' lived experiences, perceptions and feelings. This developed in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon of how teleworking and BCM processes helped to sustain businesses in the telecommunication sector in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic era. The COVID-19 pandemic has validated the essential role of telecommunications infrastructure and digital services in maintaining connectivity for communities, businesses and governments. The incessant lock downs resulting in economic and social disruption have rendered teleworking, online learning, tele-health, extensive social media usage and video streaming services a part of normal everyday life (Perez, 2020).

Businesses across the world have undergone severe changes in the supply and demand of their products services. Resilient business leaders and strategic managers who are proactive in their Business Continuity Planning are likely to perform better and remain profitable in spite of the crippling effects of the pandemic. Businesses that did not make adequate contingency plans or have a sustainable Business Continuity Plan (BCP) are not likely to survive the crippling economic effects of the pandemic (IFC, 2020).

The usual BCPs ascertain functional effectiveness following disruptive occurrences like natural disasters, power outages and cyber-attacks. They do not consider the possibility of an extended pandemic situation with widespread lockdowns, quarantines, travel restrictions and school closures. In the current global situation, businesses need to be resourced with strategic and operational tools and techniques that enable their employees to telework and continue being productive from anywhere away from the official business office (Morando, 2020).

8. RESEARCH PHYLOSOPHY

In this qualitative study, the researchers adopted a phenomenology philosophy. According to Biemel and Spiegelberg (2017), phenomenology is a form of

qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world. The primary objective of which is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced, without theories about their causal explanation and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions. In this research study we sought to establish reality from the telecommunications professionals' narratives of their lived experiences and feelings. This helped to answer the research questions and yielded comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon of how teleworking and BCM processes were helping to sustain businesses in the telecommunication sector in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic period.

9. RESEARCH APPROACH

This research study employed a qualitative approach as the aim was to respond to questions concerning telecommunications professionals' experience, meaning and perspective from their standpoint. Saunders *et al.* (2019) confirm that a qualitative approach is best suited to data such as this which is not amenable to enumeration or calculation. McLeod (2019) adds that qualitative research has a naturalistic approach to its subject matter inferring phenomena with regard to the meanings people bring to them. In this research study, the interest was in exploring the teleworking and business sustainability phenomenon within the context of the people experiencing it as it occurs in the natural setting.

Abductive reasoning was used in this study, where there was integration of both inductive and deductive inferences and cues to come up with a conclusion from the available knowledge (Aspers and Corte, 2019). Data collected in the research was used to discover knowledge about the teleworking and business sustainability phenomenon by recognising themes and clarifying patterns in the data.

10. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study followed the descriptive and explorative research design using qualitative methods for data analysis. This comprehensive research design aided the researchers in finding out the extent to which teleworking and BCM processes are helping to sustain businesses in the telecommunication sector in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic. Pratap (2018) asserts that exploratory research is important for forming the foundation for descriptive research. In this study, the knowledge discovered through exploratory research

was used to select the sample population and define the priority issues that need to be found out from the questionnaires.

11. POPULATION, SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

The population of interest, which comprise all telecommunications professionals, was the study's target population. Ames *et al.* (2019) present that in a qualitative data synthesis, excessive data gathered from a great number of samples can subvert the researcher's capability to implement a thorough analysis. Thus, the purposive sampling technique, was used for this research study. Purposive sampling involved the selection of knowledgeable participants. This technique was effective as the researchers wanted to capture a specific phenomenon which the knowledgeable and experienced experts within the telecommunications sector have lived through first-hand. Accordingly, the researchers dwelled on expert sampling, a subcategory of purposive sampling in order to glean knowledge from their proficiency in the subject matter. Rich data collected from experts furnished the researchers with in-depth insights into the phenomenon being studied. This permitted the researchers to understand the connotation and context of findings presented in the primary study.

The sampling frame included all telecommunications managers and business leaders in Zimbabwe who were teleworking during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Heterogeneity in this population was low and the participants were similar to each other, hence, a smaller sample size sufficed. To avoid selection bias and error, 30 expert participants who are a representative of the major telecommunications companies in Zimbabwe were purposively selected for the study.

12. DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS PROCEDURES

Data collection was a very central part of the study, hence, effort was put in executing the overall strategy in a meticulous manner so that all the research questions adequately answered. The study employed both primary and secondary data collection methods.

12.1. Primary Data Sources and Instruments

The research study employed online questionnaires on the Google Forms platform for the gathering of primary data. McLeod (2019) presents that questionnaires are written instruments that are either submitted face to face, by proxy or virtually to obtain knowledge, opinions and insights from participants. Emphasis was made on ensuring the reliability and validity of the questionnaire

to guarantee a degree of rigour and truthfulness of the research findings. The questionnaire used for this research was interactive and had questions that are readily apparent to the mind and simple to comprehend. The online nature of the questionnaire gave the telecommunications managers and business leaders' flexibility and ample time to provide well thought out opinions that reflect to what extent teleworking and BCM processes are helping to sustain businesses in the telecommunication sector in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 pandemic.

12.2. Secondary Data Sources and Instruments

The secondary data sources utilised for this study through desktop research include online research of government publications, internal records of organisations, books and journal articles. Saunders *et al.*, (2019) emphasises the use of authentic sources of information online, hence the researchers dwelled on peer reviewed journals and scholarly articles as well as authoritative publications from industry leaders and renowned organisations.

13. DATA ANALYSIS

Calzon (2021) affirms that qualitative data analysis consists of the identification, examination, organisation and interpretation of patterns and themes in textual data collected at the data gathering stage. In this study, the analysis process governed how these patterns and themes provided insights and knowledge that assisted in answering the research questions. NVivo, a software package for qualitative data analysis provided a means to successfully organise, analyse and draw insights from the rich unstructured data from the open-ended questionnaire responses and literature from secondary data sources.

The procedure detailed in the following table guided the data analysis stage.

Table 1: Data Analysis Steps Followed in the Research

<i>Procedure</i>	<i>Data from Questionnaires</i>
Preparing Data	Processing responses
Reviewing and Exploring Data	Reading and developing codes for the data
Analysing Data	Coding and grouping the data, identifying themes
Representing Data	Presenting findings in di scussion form

Data analysis was carried out in a systematic procedure so that it could be transparently communicated and presented to the body of knowledge. An

exhaustive thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the data collected in this research to produce trustworthy and insightful findings.

Thematic analysis was utilised as it is a flexible approach that allowed the researchers to generate novel insights and concepts deduced from qualitative data (Nowell, 2017). This approach availed the researchers the chance to familiarise with the data and explore patterns and themes across qualitative data from multiple participants. The textual data gathered from the open ended questions contained themes that were frequently mentioned or emphasised by participants. These themes were interconnected expressing the different dimensions of teleworking and BCM strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The NVivo computer software package was used in the analysis and organisation of the data. The software was crucial in detecting codes and the researcher reviewed the codes and categorised them into themes that were comparable across all the responses. Coding and categorising of the textual data generated from the open ended responses entailed reading the responses several times whilst highlighting the data and moving it into descriptive themes that gave insights into answering the research questions. The codes were organised into theme groups based on their similarity and then labelled in a way that illustrated their meaning and how they answer the research questions. The theme connections were explored and distilled to as few categories as possible. This was the final step in the data analysis as the data had been coded and grouped into themes, categorised and conceptually arranged.

The researchers used data triangulation to improve the credibility of the research study's findings (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Multiple methods of data sources which comprise questionnaires and secondary data sources were used to generate a comprehensive understanding of teleworking during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Calzon (2021) suggests, this data triangulation allowed for corroboration of findings strengthening the validity and reliability of the results and avoiding false interpretations.

14. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Findings of the study were as follows:

14.1. The Extent of Teleworking during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The research study found out that 97% of the managers reported that they had teleworked together with their teams during the Covid-19 pandemic. 60% of

these were teleworking exclusively throughout the pandemic. This stance was achieved by decongestion and prohibition of office access to employees whose roles did not require them to be physically present at the work office. However, 46.7% of the managers preferred that there be exclusive teleworking whilst 53.3% of them favoured a blend of both teleworking and working from the office on different days of the week.

It is remarkable that not any of the managers wanted to go back to exclusively working from the office. These findings are consistent with a research done in the United States of America presented by Place (2021) which discovered that most employees prefer total teleworking or blended working. Some employees have totally resisted going back to the office and opted to resign from their jobs if teleworking is not an option.

14.2. Supporting Tools and Technology: Deterrents to Efficient and Effective Teleworking

The greatest factor hindering teleworking reported by 70% of the experts was the inconsistent supply of electricity at their homes. This was fathomable considering the current economic circumstances in Zimbabwe where most households experience electricity load shedding (Tshuma, 2020). The second teleworking hindrance expressed by 63.3% of the experts was technological factors such as internet access, laptops, Wi-Fi modems and routers as well as VPN access. Robust online communication and collaboration initiatives were essential for smooth service delivery. Another usual concern for teleworking is cyber security.

Some of the telecommunications companies offered their employees solar backup systems, loans and furniture allowance to procure chairs and desks. However, the rest of the participants stated that the lack of access to these at home was hampering efficient and productive telework. Fonseka and Senadhira (2020) recommend that employees have access to adequate resources like technological infrastructure, tools and software to maintain business continuity.

14.3. Benefits of Teleworking during the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has made most telecoms managers and leaders cognisant of the benefits of teleworking. 93% of the experts agreed that teleworking helped to sustain business continuity and achieve optimum employee wellness. The most prominent benefits mentioned in this research study include business continuity and sustainability, real estate and administrative cost savings and

improved employee work-life balance as asserted by Loh and Fishbane (2020) and López-Igual and Rodríguez-Modroño (2020). The telecommunications leaders and managers were however impartial about the influence of teleworking on employee productivity and retention. This finding is comprehensible since most of the managers were still coining strategies to measure the productivity of teleworking employees.

14.4. Governance of Telework and BCM Processes

Almost 25% of the managers stated that they either had no teleworking policies in place in their companies or they were not aware of the documented Business Continuity Management (BCM) processes or policies. 56.7% of the experts agreed that they had teleworking and BCM processes tested or implemented before the Covid-19 lockdowns started in March 2020. In their report, Mudzingwa (2020) provides evidence that these participants are leaders from companies in the Econet group who conducted pilots for teleworking and tested their BCM when the initial cases of Covid-19 were being reported outside Africa.

14.5. Demand and Business Sustainability for Telecommunication Services

83% of the managers confirm that there was an increased demand for telecommunications products and services during the pandemic particularly on lock down periods. These claims by the telecommunications experts were in agreement with the POTRAZ 2021 1st quarter report which revealed growth in demand of digital services for both Mobile Network Operators and Internet Service Providers. This was plausible as customers had a new need for reliable internet connections to use when working from home, learning online, entertainment whilst offices were closed and to be in touch with friends and relatives whilst social distancing. The rise in demand did not directly translate to a rise in revenues due to the unsustainable regulatory tariff and exchange rate depreciation and hyperinflation (Gweshe, 2020).

Another reason for the drop in revenues cited by the telecommunications managers was the need for more capital expenditure for capacity upgrades to curtail the network congestion and service blocking caused by the increase in appetite for digital services. Some customers complained of deteriorated quality of experience hence it was imperative for the companies to have network upgrades to maintain service provision leadership positions. Owing to lockdown measures, hotels, lodges and restaurants had their connections either

suspended, postponed or downgraded. Accordingly, a few experts mentioned that there was a decrease of voice and data demand in their responses.

14.6. Availability and Capacity of Provision of Services During the Pandemic

Teleworking and robust BCM processes warranted that telecommunications companies in Zimbabwe were able to offer continued service delivery and business continuity even during the lockdown periods. The businesses made efforts to ensure that their services were adhering to availability, reliability and dependability standards. Some of the managers confirm that their BCM processes and teleworking strategies guided their teams in making impactful ad hoc decisions during the unprecedented times. The customer facing teams moved to provision of support through digital platforms and the technical teams continued their projects whilst teleworking through online collaboration.

15. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Telecommunications companies in Zimbabwe had not enforced teleworking policies on such a large scale before the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. The following recommendations will ascertain successful and effective teleworking and BCM processes during a pandemic or disaster situation.

15.1. Agile Teleworking and BCM Policies and Processes for Businesses

Telecommunications managers and business leaders need to come up with agile teleworking and BCM policies and processes to ensure business continuity and sustainability. The research study revealed that the lack of robust teleworking and BCM policies and standards during the pandemic resulted in some telecommunications companies failing to provide the expected value to customers as they were unsuccessful in meeting their service level agreements. The most prominent businesses during the pandemic were those that had agile business models that permitted them to align their business resiliency processes and policies with teleworking and pertinent BCM measures.

15.2. Provision of Adequate Teleworking Tools and Platforms

It is recommended that telecommunications managers and business leaders provide adequate teleworking tools and platforms to their employees for successful telework. From the investigations, it was noted that most teleworkers fail to perform their jobs at home successfully because of lack of appropriate

teleworking resources like a constant supply of electricity or backup power, reliable broadband internet and ergonomic furniture.

15.3. Employee Productivity Management Systems and Standards

The adoption of results-based performance management systems would ease employee evaluation and appraisal since they will be measured against agreed upon deliverables and goals. The experts complained that employee performance management and productivity tracking was one of the biggest challenges they faced in leading teleworking teams. ILO (2020) suggests that management by results is the best for productivity measurement.

15.4. Digital Transformation

Telecommunications companies should speed up their digital transformation journeys in order to integrate digital technology in all facets of their businesses. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the urgency to go digital and change how the businesses operate and deliver services to their customers. Employee roles should also change and become agile.

15.5. Work Time and Work Organisation

It is recommended that teleworkers have a teleworking work plan agreement with their employer. Some of the participants protested that telework has adversely altered their work-life balance as they work longer hours than when at the office and are expected to be always available even outside the stipulated work times. The plan should highlight the priority tasks and detail guiding principle for employee availability, hours of work and leave room for ensuring employees work when they are most productive.

15.6. Online Communication and Collaboration

With teleworking teams working from disparate geographic locations it is recommended that they strengthen online communication and collaboration skills for seamless service delivery. Businesses should invest in web based communication and collaboration platforms like SharePoint, Microsoft Teams and other Office 365 products. Communication should also include social aspects of work in order for teleworkers to continue some office traditions and camaraderie when working from home. Abulibdeh (2020) affirms that this motivates employees and boosts productivity whilst preventing them from feeling isolated as they will be reminded they are part of a team.

15.7. Contractual and Legal Implications

It is recommended that employers come up with teleworking agreements for their employees. These should spell out the conditions pertaining to contractual changes, work location, the compensation of teleworking related expenses, and notification processes in the event hindrances to accomplish work tasks like ailments or work related accidents occur. Businesses are urged to possess adequate insurance policies in case an occupational accident takes place during teleworking.

15.8. Robust Teleworking Policies and Standards for the Sector

The Government Policy Makers and Regulatory Authority must come up with a telework guide that offers practical policies to assist managers responsible for implementing telework. Policies like “The right to disconnect” may help in ensuring employees’ rights are respected and they are free to switch off their work devices after work to moderate work intensity and nurture a healthy work-life balance. The government and regulators could also mandate that employers are responsible for furnishing the employees’ home work stations and providing adequate tools and platforms.

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