



Full Paper

Virtual Team Challenges During Covid-19 Pandemic

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The Year 2020 has surprised the world because of the coronavirus disease, commonly known as COVID-19. While many Filipino software development teams operate on virtual teams ("VTs"), limited studies have been conducted to explore the various issues related to virtual work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the conduct of this study, 14 software developers who work in organizations with a hybrid setup were interviewed. Using the content-coding approach supplemented by thematic analysis. Adjustments include adopting flexible work hours, accepting late-night calls, disrupting sleeping patterns, and lack of social interactions among colleagues. On the other hand, there are also privileges such as work and location flexibility and avoiding traffic and travel expenses. To overcome challenges, VT members improved their communication skills, observed work shifts, developed technical competence in using different collaboration tools, being resourceful, stayed focused, observed time management, and reached out to new team members. While most respondents are used to this kind of work environment, the health crisis has highlighted the importance of communication, technical skills, empathy, time management, focus, dependability, organization, and resourcefulness as qualities of an effective team member. Having experienced the work-from-home setup and persisting in its challenges, virtual team members now preferred the hybrid setup.

Mga Susing Salita; Virtual Team, COVID-19 pandemic, work-life balance, hybrid work arrangement

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Introduction

Software development is one of the more established sub-sectors of the Philippine Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled services industry. Over the years, Filipino software developers have made a name for themselves because of the quality of their work and service efficiency. Typically, local software development teams based in the Philippines are part of a larger global software development team that operates in a distributed environment. The industry's most prominent clients are the United States of America (USA), contributing about 53 percent share of revenues, Asia Pacific (APAC) with 24 percent, and Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) with 18 percent (IT-BPM Roadmap 2022).

As of December 2021, the Philippine Economic Zone Authority ("PEZA") has 1,274 IT locator companies operating in 297 IT centers/parks and providing 1,017,559 jobs nationwide, with exports of US\$ 15.797 billion. This is a bright spot even during the COVID-19 pandemic for the BPO industry, which includes non-voice services from IT support to animation and call centers, with a revenue rise of 1.4% to \$26.7 billion in 2020.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, PEZA temporarily increased the work-from-home (WFH) arrangement, which allowed the BPO industry to have a 90% WFH arrangement with their employees. While many Filipino software development teams operate on virtual teams (VTs), limited studies have been conducted to explore the various issues related to virtual work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though there are only a few studies on VTs (Zeuge et al., 2020), which commonly come from the USA and the United Kingdom (Victor Garro-Abarca et al., 2020), the experience of VTs during the COVID-19 pandemic provides revelations that may not have been evident before in the software development setting.

The practice of VT is familiar to those geographically dispersed, in cross-cultural environments, operating in multiple time zones with different talents and skills even before the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic required almost all the workforce, even though not geographically dispersed, to work from home. Further study is needed to understand the challenges related to the interface between technology and human beings in a virtual work environment.

This study aims to explore the dynamics of virtual teams, including understanding their operational processes and the motivational factors driving professional participation. It further seeks to identify the evolving perspectives of virtual team members during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically examining the challenges encountered during this period. Finally, the research distinguishes the essential skills and qualities required for successful and effective virtual team membership.

This is the research gap that this study would like to fill by identifying new practices that emerged in the Philippines.

Limitations

While the qualitative design of this study provided context and depth to understand the hybrid work setup during the pandemic, a quantitative study could allow for broader inferences of the results.

The data collected during the pandemic served as a foundation for this study's findings. Future research may replicate this study to compare how our findings differ in the post-pandemic workplace setup.

Implications

More importantly, major stakeholders such as the BPO Industry Association, government, health sector, BPO Company leadership, and VT members should collaborate and propose strategic and action plans to promote and implement work-life balance programs during the post-pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the work-life balance of BPO software development virtual teams, thus resulting in BPO companies necessitating a review of work-health promotion in the BPO industry (Candelario et al., 2024) emphasizing the need for effective and cultural sensitive strategies to promote workplace health among BPO employees. The findings show that BPO workers are exposed to risks such as physical and psychological stress, sleep disorders, and occupational illnesses due to the distinct challenges of their roles. Despite existing occupational health and labor laws, compliance within BPO companies is inadequate, with only a few offering comprehensive wellness programs. The authors proposed a conceptual framework for workplace health promotion initiatives tailored for BPOs in the country, a roadmap for future approaches tailored to the unique cultural perspectives of the Philippine BPO environment. The framework has eight integral

strategies categorized into three major factors influencing workplace health: organizational, individual, and societal. The framework includes focusing on Maternal Support and Work-life balance. Under this category, implementing culturally relevant strategies to prevent burnout and stress, such as providing wellness retreats, team-building activities, and recreational programs, is essential for promoting employee well-being.

Literature Review

The category with the most significant number of studies is the Aspects of Virtual Teams, where the area of investigation includes communication, trust, efficiency, commitment, cohesion, efficiency, efficiency, knowledge sharing, performance, and leadership in virtual teams. Based on quantitative analysis, communication and trust are the most critical aspects directly affecting team performance. Good communication among the team members affects trust in the team and eventually affects the efficiency and commitment of the team members (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021; Zainab & Demirel, 2022; Cheng et al., 2022; Flavian et al., 2022). Furthermore, when there is unity in the team, it leads to higher team performance (Chaudhary et al., 2022). Literature reviews published during COVID-19 also provided insights on virtual teams' intellectual capital management leadership and preparedness for future disruptions (Cristea & Dinu, 2022; Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Bhargava, 2020) as critical traits for high-performance VTs. The rest of the reviews looked at the other aspects of virtual teams, such as trust (Watanuki & Moraes (2022) and work design (Handke et al., 2020). Some studies made comparisons within the context of the pandemic, but the emphasis is not on how virtual teams navigate during these challenging times (Klonek et al., 2022).

Working in virtual teams has established a set of challenges from earlier studies. However, the challenges brought by the pandemic made it harder for virtual teams to function as they do since people are less motivated and less satisfied (Beirouty & Demirel, 2022), and they were forced to work with a heightened level of virtuality (Feitosa & Salas, 2021; Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). To address these challenges, the following are the guidelines according to Feitosa & Salas (2021): 1) Monitor trust; 2) Focus on process gain; 3) Foster inclusion through psychological safety; and 4) Assess teamwork often.

However, only a few studies present the best practices in virtual teams during the pandemic (Cristea & Dinu, 2022). In contrast, other studies were inclined to provide recommendations based on the challenges of the pandemic (Chamakiotis et al., 2021).

Nature of Virtual Teams

Virtual teams allow members to collaborate, work together, achieve specific goals, and deliver business results while engaged in a technology-enabled environment (Beyerlein et al., 2002). To differentiate Traditional Teams (TT) from virtual teams, the latter are geographically dispersed, seldom meet face-to-face, and may live in various locations or cultures. In contrast, traditional teams consist of individuals working within close physical proximity. In addition, VTs use computer-mediated asynchronous communication (CMAC) continuously from multiple contributors simultaneously without restricted turn-taking. Meanwhile, TT communicate synchronously and face-to-face (Berry, 2011)). VTs have heterogeneous cultural diversity, while traditional teams are homogeneous in language, nationality, and values (Staples & Zhao, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

Before COVID-19, the Input-Process-Output (IPO) Model was used to understand the research themes and future opportunities for VTs (Gilson et al., 2015). It presents a more structured way of analyzing the literature on virtual team research themes from 2005 to 2015. Instead of listing the themes randomly, it has no preconceived idea of how VT research had developed. The empirical studies of the IPO Model were based on input process, output, and emergent outcomes. By doing so, the constructs and discovered themes are more organized. The inputs are more specific to team virtuality, technology, globalization, and leadership. Regarding the process, two major themes are mediators and moderators, focusing on trust. The outcomes represent how to enhance VT performance.

During the post-pandemic, the same IPO model was used to see the relationship between input models and other factors, such as socio-emotional and task-oriented processes, and how they affect the output factors (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). Input factors are (1) Technical, (2) Design, (3) Culture, and (4) Training, while Task Processes include (1) Communication, (2) Coordination, and (3) Task-Technology Fit, and Socio-Emotional Process, including: (1) Trust, (2)

Relationship Building, and (3) Cohesion. Output factors comprise: (1) Performance, and (2) Satisfaction.

Comparing the two studies, the Pre-Pandemic study used systematic literature with a qualitative approach. In contrast, the post-pandemic study quantitatively analyzed how the input factors affect trust and communication. In addition, the Pre-Pandemic study emerged from a broader scope across several disciplines/professions, such as accountancy, psychology, information technology, engineering, and

software design. In contrast, the post-pandemic study was focused on the software development teams. It also affirmed the IPO Model using Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) from the earlier study (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). Given that the post-pandemic study (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021) is closer to this study in terms of the global pandemic situation, the author has adopted the said IPO model initially. However, this study further explored the Philippine BPO context, focusing on software development.

Method

This study used a qualitative, exploratory design using in-depth interviews with 14 participants. With the assistance of the College of Computer Studies Graduate Community of De La Salle University – Manila, the alumni community of affiliated education institutions, and referrals from industry colleagues, a semi-structured questionnaire was used. The questionnaire included the consent form, demographic questions that served as the inclusion criteria, and the questions for the study. Respondents are members of a software development team working in at least one virtual team before and during the pandemic. The respondents included managers, team leaders, and other software professionals from different BPOs in the country who are part of a virtual team project/s.

Gupta & Pathak's (2017) revised study provides a pre-pandemic context. Due to health restrictions and protocols in the Philippines, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Fourteen respondents participated in in-depth discussions guided by a semi-structured questionnaire based on the IPO Model. Respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their answers freely. All virtual meetings were recorded with respondent consent. Records were stored using assigned respondent identification

numbers as filenames to ensure anonymity during transcription and analysis.

The data from the questionnaire and transcription of the interviews were analyzed using the content-coding approach followed by a thematic analysis. These techniques have been used in several studies (Stallman et al., 2023; Durante et al., 2022; Ready et al., 2020; Knox et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2020).

Using a categorization coding scheme, content coding was used to systematically assign codes to data segments (Woike, 2007). Informed by the research objectives (Ayton, 2023), the initial categories for the coding scheme included skills needed, VT member qualities, challenges encountered, adjustments made, motivations to work in VT, and perspective. Through careful reading and re-reading of the data, new categories are added to the codebook (Rice & Ezzy, 1999).

After coding the data, thematic analysis was conducted to interpret recurring themes or patterns that emerged as necessary to describe the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006), (Daly et al., 1997).

Results and Discussions

The respondents define a virtual team as a group working from different locations using a collaboration tool. Before the pandemic, the common connotation was that it comprised team members from other countries. Before the pandemic, a "global team" usually meant a team with members from different countries. The pandemic changed this, as widespread remote work made even locally based teams global in the sense that they were geographically dispersed and relied on virtual communication, blurring the lines of the original definition. With this new work setup, there were adjustments in how they worked, challenges experienced, and skills and personal qualities needed for the work-from-home setup.

Drawing from the insights gained through content coding and developing a deeper understanding of the data through thematic analysis, the following themes were generated: work-from-home adjustments, work-from-home privileges, overcoming challenges, VT member success traits, and work setup preference of VT members, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

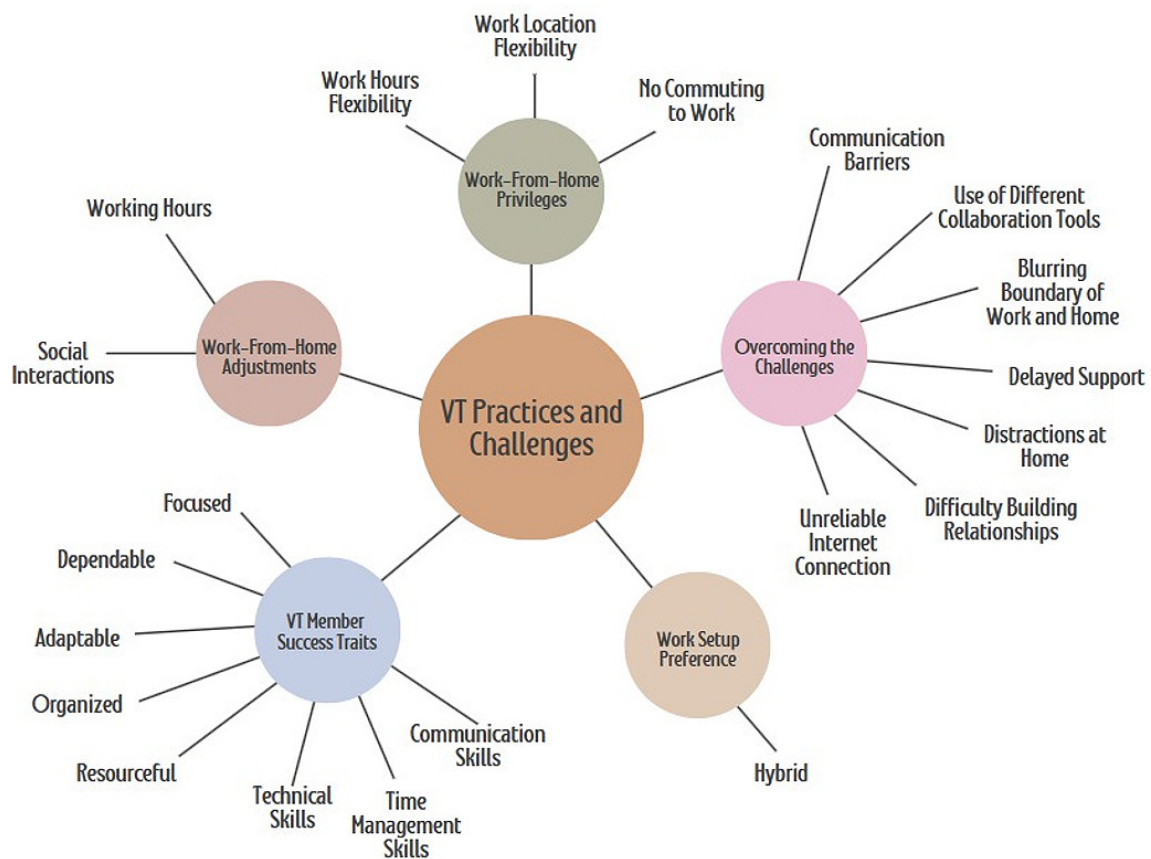


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Map of Virtual Team Challenges During Covid-19 Pandemic

Work From Home Adjustments

The lockdowns and restrictions forced everybody to implement the WFH setup, which changed the workplace environment for virtual teams – even those already implementing the work-from-home setup before the pandemic, who still underwent some adjustments. Virtual team members must adopt flexible working hours in a work-from-home setup. It was quickly implemented, especially for those managing different projects with different time zones. They could freely discuss how to go about their day, overseeing their work and personal activities. However, most of the respondents observed experiencing more late-night calls. Since they were just home, clients and team members from other countries thought they could take late-night calls. As an effect, this drained them mentally and physically, affecting their sleeping hours and patterns. On the other hand, working at home spared the team members considerable time commuting to the office. This gave them extra time to get more sleep and do personal activities they could not do when working in the office. Also, not going to the office demanded less preparation from the team members before starting the day's work.

Both the previous study (Beirouty & Demirel, 2022)

and the current one highlight the crucial role of communication in team dynamics. The earlier study emphasizes optimizing and strategically planning communication to enhance team performance. In contrast, this study reveals the consequences of mismanagement or a lack of boundaries, which negatively impact individuals.

While the previous research advocates for balanced communication to boost team efficiency, the current study shows how excessive or poorly timed communication leads to imbalance and harms individual well-being.

The result also highlights the burden and potential stress caused by unregulated communication and reflects the lack of control over communication timing experienced by team members and the timing of communication (late-night calls).

Another notable change in the work environment is the lack of social interaction with colleagues. Some respondents missed the small talk during breaks to relieve some stress and to ask for help with work. The absence of these informal communications can affect collaboration and building trust (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Varhelahti & Turnquist, 2021;

Whillans et al., 2021).

The respondents affirm that meaningful interactions, which include social information and nonverbal cues typically found in face-to-face communication, and spontaneous, informal exchanges have been recognized as crucial for preventing conflict and building trust in virtual teams. Previous and this study stress the

importance of proximity and informal communication in fostering effective teamwork. When team members work closely (physically or through frequent communication), it not only enhances collaboration on tasks but also builds interpersonal trust through informal exchanges. The absence of such interactions can weaken trust and negatively impact the team's ability to collaborate effectively.

On a positive note, because of this lack of interaction, some respondents have become more independent and resourceful in searching for solutions to their problems while waiting for the response of colleagues regarding their concerns. VT also engages in individual work activities, where team members work independently on task and process work (Whillans et al., 2021). While outcome interdependence positively influenced the functioning of virtual teams, particularly by boosting motivation, task interdependence yielded mixed results (Whillans et al., 2021).

Work From Home Privileges

Work Hours and Location Flexibility

The primary motivation of the respondents is the flexibility of work hours. Before the pandemic, there was a fixed working schedule in different shifts, like working from 9:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. But because of the WFH setup, depending on the nature of their work, the respondents can section their day to their convenience. For example, one respondent said he can set to work from 8:00 A.M. to 9:00 A.M. and then have breakfast for 30 minutes before working again. Another respondent said he can put in noncontinuous working hours, and for each time frame, he can focus on a specific project.

One respondent said that all his team members are from other countries, and even though he and his colleagues in the office may handle the same client, the functionalities are different. So, working in the office is unnecessary in his case, and he finds it more efficient to work from home and attend to

other matters in his personal life. This gave him the capacity to multitask with his graduate studies and, at the same time, monitor the projects he was handling. Some others multitask with monitoring and taking care of their family, especially those with children, house chores, and errands.

Some respondents prefer working from home even before the pandemic for health reasons. With the freedom to set their routine, they can already allot time for activities that make them healthier by preparing their meals, when to eat during fasting, and going to the gym for exercise. Similarly, aside from being flexible in terms of time, one can also be flexible about the location where one works. One respondent shared that when he had a problem with the internet connection in their house, he went to his relative in another city for the internet connection since using mobile data may be needed for him to do the task. However, despite the flexibility, some others still find working in the office to be better because of the change of scenery, seeing the outside environment for idea-building and other motivations, and having social interactions.

Avoiding Traffic and Expenses in Commuting to Work

Working from home during the pandemic has saved everyone a long trip to the office. As a result, this gave the virtual team members more sleeping hours as they did not need to wake up very early before their shift. For example, one respondent said that for him to be able to attend a 2:00 P.M. meeting, he does not need to wake up at 10:00 A.M. to make it on time, considering the time it takes for him to travel. He can even set an alarm at 1:55 P.M. and get ready in 5 minutes for the meeting. Also, the virtual team member is saved from the expenses that go along with commuting, such as fares or gasoline, toll fees, and parking fees.

Focusing specifically on millennials in the BPO sector, the shift to remote work offered increased flexibility and time saving benefits but also presented distinct financial advantages.

Overcoming Challenges

Challenges in virtual teams that were evident even before the pandemic are communication and using different collaboration tools. In a work-from-home setup, aside from those mentioned, additional challenges include the blurring boundary of work and home, delayed support, distractions at home, unreliable internet connection, and difficulty building relations, especially for new hires.

Communication Barriers

The language barrier is one of the significant concerns in virtual teams with different socio-cultural backgrounds (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020), (Varhelahti & Turnquist, 2021). Despite the challenge, one can take this as an opportunity to improve one's skills. One of the respondents appreciated being a member of a virtual team composed of different nationalities because it helped him improve his communication skills and adaptability. Understanding the context and culture of other nationalities is necessary to communicate with the team members effectively. The respondent cited that there are high and low contexts in communication. For example, Filipinos are usually high-context, and when sending emails or even in verbal communication, they provide many details and send relatively long emails. Other nationalities, like the people in The Netherlands is low-context, and usually, their emails are only short replies. Therefore, a virtual team member should know and understand these backgrounds so they can develop the skills to communicate in different contexts.

Since communication is done virtually through emails, instant messaging, or voice calls, if a virtual team member does not see the other person, it may cause miscommunications that lead to thinking that the other person is rude. However, some are just "bland" when sending messages. Thus, when making calls, it was preferred that video calls also be done to see the faces and reactions of the person on the other end of the line. One respondent said he likes making video calls rather than sending messages to explain things. The risk of misunderstandings is lower when talking through voice or video calls than via email (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Choosing the right communication tool that fits the team's formal and informal discussions and emotional and task processes is necessary (Varhelahti & Turnquist, 2021; Han & Hazard, 2022).

Use of Different Collaboration Tools

Different companies use different collaboration tools. Some virtual teams are using only one, while others are using more. Each collaboration tool was used for specific purposes and had unique features or functionalities from others. When one of the respondents transferred to another company, he had to learn the collaboration tools used by the new company with which he was connected. In his new company, he uses two applications (Slack and Webex). When he is in a meeting using Webex, he must update his status in Slack so his team members will know whether he is in a meeting.

Unlike his previous company, where he was only using one application (MS Teams), when he is in a meeting, his status automatically reflects that. There are times when the clients specify the tools to use. For example, if the client prefers to use MS Teams, everyone uses MS Teams, even if the virtual team uses another application. The use of different tools, such as for communication, can be characterized by cultural differences and preferences (Gilson et al., 2015). Therefore, virtual team members should be familiar with the different tools for collaboration.

Blurring Boundary Between Home and Work

In a virtual team, some team members are expected to be in another country with a different time zone. In a work-from-home setup, since the team member has a laptop or mobile phone in the house, he still receives messages and emails even after his work schedule. Despite the given work schedule, there is an unspoken expectation that virtual team members are always online to take calls, even at night. Also, clients in another time zone must know about the virtual team member's holidays or non-working days. Some respondents would still reply to messages and emails. However, a respondent said that although it is part of working in a virtual team, especially on a flexible schedule, boundaries should still be respected and handled well. Several respondents set a rigid schedule for their working hours to address this concern. So, when their work

schedule is done, they make sure that they no longer work outside that schedule by turning off the laptop or blocking their hours in their applications unless the work hours are officially extended. As said by a respondent, "One of the learnings this pandemic is if you value your time, set a schedule." Moreover, it is particularly challenging when a virtual team member oversees several projects across different time zones. There were times when one of the respondents managed more than the usual load because of the number of projects assigned to her. Although having a flexible schedule helps address this, it does not entirely solve the concern and has also affected her health and sleeping schedule.

Delayed Support from Colleagues

Office work facilitated quick collaboration and immediate assistance from nearby colleagues or through centralized help desks. Remote work, however, often hindered communication and slowed response times, with messages sometimes overlooked or forgotten.

Since the Philippines has a significant time

difference (twelve to sixteen hours in advance) from USA where other members of the VT are located and customers as well, they were forced to work with a heightened level of virtuality (Feitosa & Salas, 2021; Garro-Abarca et al., 2021). This affirms that interdependence positively impacts virtual team performance by increasing motivation, while task interdependence shows mixed results. High knowledge characteristics, like task complexity, hinder team functioning in virtual environments due to added demands. However, job resources, such as feedback, improving team performance, acting as a buffer against the challenges of virtual work (Handke et al., 2020).

Distractions from Home

While working from home allows virtual team members to take care of personal activities, resulting in increased overall productivity and work-life balance, the home environment is full of distractions. There are temptations to take personal time during work hours that lead to adjusting the work schedule. For example,

one might think of taking a nap for 2 hours and plan to do the work later that day, thus extending the working hours. Some others would miss their work hours for unintentionally napping longer than intended.

For those who are living with their family, there are times when errands are requested, even during work hours. Moreover, for those who have children, interruptions may come at any time. One respondent shared that meeting with the team members was difficult because some were preoccupied with these distractions at home, unlike before the pandemic, when they could have 2- to 3-hour meetings. Sometimes, others only attend the meeting if there are sanctions or consequences. Virtual interactions became less effective due to increased distractions, and virtual team members needed help to separate themselves from their private lives. To address this challenge, a virtual team member needs to be disciplined and focused to have enjoyable time management. One respondent said she strictly follows her schedule to deal with her work and family separately.

One practical step to tackle the challenges faced by today's virtual teams is to foster inclusion through psychological safety (Feitosa & Salas, 2021) and by being mindful of others' limitations (e.g., personal challenges).

Unreliable Internet Connection

Working from home is dependent on internet connections. There are instances when the issue is on the Internet Service Provider (ISP) and others on the signal interference brought by their home's physical layout and structure. To address the former concern, one respondent mentioned that he needed to go to a relative's house in another city to be able to work. And the latter was managed by installing a mesh in his room for a better internet connection. However, even if the virtual team member has secured his internet connection, the issue may occur to the person he is talking to on the other end of the line. One respondent recalled that it happened to him once when the other person was suddenly offline and didn't know when he would return online.

According to the Pulse' Internet Resilience Index (IRI), the Philippines falls behind its Southeast Asian neighbors in terms of internet connection stability. To reduce the likelihood of an unstable internet connection, a recommendation is to set new procedures and rules to create a new virtual team business environment (Beirouty & Demirel, 2022).

Difficulty Building Relationships with New Hires

During the pandemic, new hires in the Visayas and Mindanao islands of the Philippines immediately started their work in the work-from-home setup. Building an excellent work relationship remotely is complex and can usually be carried off through face-to-face interactions (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). However,

leveraging the technologies of the virtual platform to learn more about the team members can bridge the gap (Feitosa & Salas, 2021). Knowing this challenge, tenured virtual team members proactively reached out to the new hires by setting up meetings, conducting online quarterly team-building activities, creating a virtual office that evolved into group chats for every batch of new hires and topic-specific group chats, and doing daily 30-minute check-ins.

VT Member Success Traits

To thrive working in virtual teams, especially in a work-from-home setup, the respondents emphasized the skills and personal qualities a virtual team member should develop or possess. The skills that the respondents highlighted are communication, time management, and technical skills. According to one respondent, skills can be learned, but a person's character can be developed more efficiently, and it is also difficult to gauge during

the hiring process. Regardless, the respondents' experience called for virtual team members who are engaged, dependable, adaptable, organized, and resourceful.

Communication Skills

Communication is one of the main elements in building an effective team (Feitosa & Salas, 2021), (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Being a good communicator means knowing how to listen and express himself. This is particularly important because most tasks entail meetings and sending messages. During meetings, it is respected if the person speaks his mind and can clearly express his thoughts, comments, or suggestions, as this is one way of contributing to the team. This should be reinforced, too, as Filipinos are innately shy to express themselves as compared to other nationalities like the Americans. Also, the team members should be able to communicate not just clearly and effectively with the team members but also with other teams and clients. Virtual team members, mainly when communicating across nationalities, should feel empowered to ask clarifying questions whenever they are in doubt or need further information. The language gap should be limited by ensuring that both parties have the same understanding. Furthermore, several respondents have mentioned that empathy is necessary to facilitate effective communication. The virtual team member should be able to put himself in another person's shoes to know the appropriate approach to the conversation without friction between the parties involved. Empathy plays a vital role in the team's interpersonal dynamics (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020), (Axtell et al., 2022; Han & Hazard, 2022).

Time Management Skills

Given all the distractions in a work-from-home setup, managing time well is the key to a successful work-from-home experience. It includes following the work hours schedule or segregating work and house chores/ errands to maintain a work-life balance. Depending on the nature of their functions, a virtual team member can be flexible in chunking their schedule. Still, he should ensure the deliverables are finished on the intended schedule.

Technical Skills

Technical skills are prerequisites for working in a virtual software development team. However, it was emphasized by one of the respondents that a virtual team member should be familiar with different collaboration platforms such as Jira, Git, GitHub,

SharePoint, Confluence, and MS Teams, as some clients might require the use of platforms that the company does not use. Technical knowledge is a typical challenge when using these tools (Varhelahti & Turnquist, 2021).

Focused

Working from home changes the work environment. The comfort of home has also become a work environment. A virtual team member should be able to stay focused during work hours by being self-disciplined. Self-discipline addresses the problems of laxity and lack of accountability (Axtell et al., 2022). Having no physical supervision of team leaders and managers in a work-from-home setup, this need is amplified.

Dependable

Since a virtual team member who works at home is not surveyed, the team leader or manager should be able to trust him to do his work even with minimal supervision. At the same time, the virtual team member should be honest in giving updates on the status of the assigned work. With the increased virtuality during the pandemic, Feitosa and Salas (2021) argue that trust in teams needs more than just the initial building maintenance and monitoring, which are crucial.

Adaptable

The pandemic changed how work is done and how to communicate. Therefore, adapting to these changes is a necessary quality of a virtual team member (Han & Hazard, 2022). This includes being flexible in working hours, especially when there are urgent concerns from the client, and building rapport with his colleagues as a collaborator. Another example is that during the pandemic, some companies scaled down the virtual team compositions because of losing some projects and clients by transferring several team members to another team. Consequently, the assigned team members had to learn new skills needed in the new team, and team members who were retained had to extend their skills to accommodate the functions left by the team members who were transferred.

Organized

During the pandemic, the work environment was restructured into an online environment. For those not used to the work-from-home setup, being organized helps manage the tasks, time, presentation of outputs, and everything else.

Resourceful

One limitation of working from home is the potential delay in addressing urgent questions or concerns of virtual team members, as individuals in virtual environments may ignore requests and delay responses (Feitosa & Salas, 2021). So, instead of halting the work, the virtual member should be resourceful in looking for answers through other sources and means. Furthermore, it is essential to note that from the management's standpoint, it is better to hire people with experience, especially in different shifts. The experience of hiring during the pandemic resulted in a high attrition rate due to factors related to the online setup or the pandemic's effect on people's mental health.

Towards the New Normal

Following the lifting of lockdowns and issuing return-to-work directives, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies gradually returned to pre-pandemic office arrangements, encouraging virtual team members to transition back to on-site work. This transition often involves mandatory office presence, even if only once or twice a month. However, having experienced the work-from-home model and its associated challenges, many virtual team members now favor a hybrid work arrangement. This preference stems from the desire to retain the flexibility of working from home for a significant portion of the week while still benefiting from occasional in-office interaction and collaboration, typically once a week. This hybrid approach seeks to balance the advantages of remote work with the benefits of face-to-face teamwork and social connection.

This study revealed that Filipino BPO workers are flexible in adjusting their time for work and other personal activities such as school commitments and personal errands. It also supports the idea that Filipinos are recognized for their hard work, persistence, intelligence, and loyalty. It also introduces the concept of work-life balance. Unfortunately, this worldwide trend is unknown to many Filipino workers, especially those outside the city or urban areas. A well-defined and effective work-life balance policy and appropriate local material to analyze WLB were recommended (Gumpal & Cardenas, 2021).

Conclusions

This study has extended the findings of how virtual teams work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the IPO Model, the Philippine culture of work-life

balance appeared crucial in a virtual team setup (Gampal & Cardenas, 2021). Likewise, developing countries like the Philippines must set up stable and reliable internet infrastructure to keep up with the demands of an online work environment. Technical and soft skills appeared to be expected in both studies, as BPO employees in a software development work industry can adjust based on the project team or client preferences on technology tools. This study extended those themes during the health crisis. It highlighted the importance of communication, technical skills, empathy, time management, focus, dependability, organization, and resourcefulness to be an effective team member. Extra effort was introduced to reach out to new members of the organization for social interaction. The perspective

of VT members has remained the same since they practiced it, but working from home has brought considerable attention to prioritizing work and family responsibilities. Moreover, its human and personal aspects were crucial since it involved family and work. Comparing pre-pandemic challenges, the dimension of remote work with face-to-face interaction with team members has answered that social interaction is needed, which was missing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other suggestions include giving employees time for volunteering, reconsidering time off policies, and providing better support for parents through flexible roles and equal parental leave benefits. Health cash plans and personalized perks, such as gym memberships or office services, are also recommended to reduce employee stress. Managers are encouraged to involve employees in creating work-life balance strategies, recognizing that each worker's needs are different and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Finally, the article emphasizes the importance of tailoring work experiences to individual employees to attract and retain talent in the BPO sector (Chen et al., 2024). The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the Business Process Outsourcing – Industry Tripartite Council (BPO-ITC) introduced a Voluntary Code of Good Practices to enhance workplace safety and health in the BPO industry. This code aims to promote decent employment conditions and safety standards, with the government and BPO sectors playing key roles in its implementation.

In 2008, Department Circular No. 01-08 was issued to guide BPO firms in creating effective Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) programs. This includes the requirement for BPO companies to provide an

in-house doctor and resting facilities for pregnant employees, ensuring better healthcare and support.

Additionally, the Magna Carta for IT-BPO Workers, proposed in 2022, outlines labor rights for BPO employees. It emphasizes fair labor practices, job security, a national entry-level wage aligned with a family living wage, and access to medical benefits starting from employment. This legislation seeks to protect workers from exploitation while ensuring a fair and safe working environment in the BPO industry (Candelario et al. 2024).

Conclusions

Based on the result of this study and the current literature on work-life balance (post-pandemic), the researchers will conduct a follow-up study on the proposed framework (either quantitative or qualitative) targeted to specific BPO companies wherein the primary line of business is software development. It can be tailored to this vertical industry where the employees are millennials and Generation X.

The following are the actionable items for recommendation:

1. Present the conceptual framework on Workplace Health Promotion Initiatives (Figure 2) to IT-BPAP, the largest BPO Association in the Philippines.
2. Get support from some BPO Software Industry to craft a program explicitly addressing concerns and applicable programs of work-life balance initiatives. Each company has its unique character, culture, and policies.
3. Identify voluntary pilot BPO Companies for Implementation
4. Monitor the implementation and identify areas of strengths and weaknesses.
5. Assess the effectiveness of the work-life balance program and propose possible improvements for the next pilot batch.

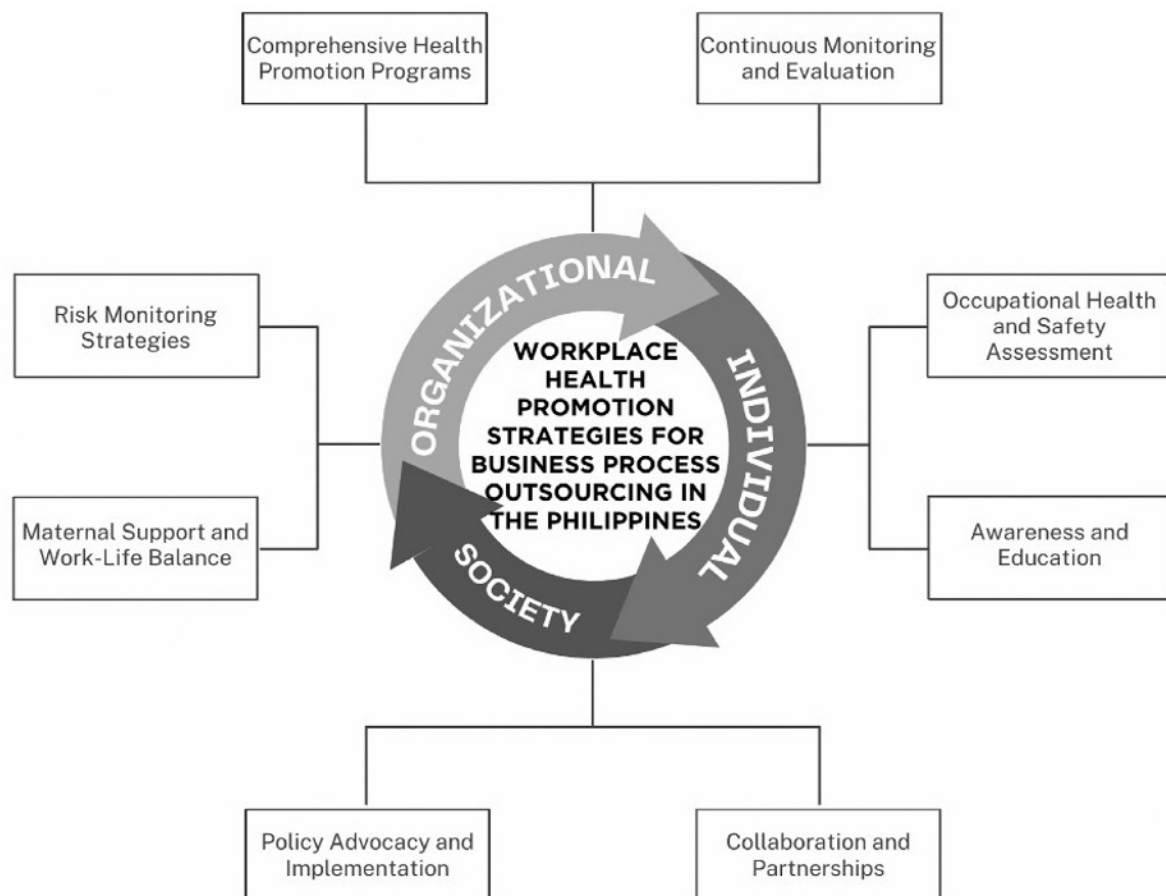


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for Workplace Health Promotion Initiatives (Candelario, et al., 2024)

Ethics Statement

Following our institutional policies, we have thoroughly reviewed important documents such as the University's Code of Research Ethics and Guide to Responsible Conduct of Research, the Operational Guidelines for the Research Ethics Review Committee, and the Data Privacy Policy. An informed consent form was disseminated to all informants, stating the study's goal, research procedures, clauses for confidentiality, voluntary participation, risks, benefits, and contact information of the researcher and the institution. The said document briefed the informants regarding their rights as informants and the privacy and data handling protocols implemented throughout the research.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contribution

Caguiat contributed to conceptualization, data collection, original draft preparation, recommendation, review, and editing, while Gallardo provided the data analysis and interpretation of results. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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