



An evaluation of the challenges and opportunities for teleworking in Zimbabwean organisations in the context of COVID-19.

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Abstract

The study explores challenges and opportunities of teleworking in Zimbabwean organisations. The study's overall objective is to evaluate the challenges and opportunities of teleworking in Zimbabwean organisations. Data was collected using online desk-based research. The research approach was purely qualitative. The results indicated that there are more challenges than opportunities for Zimbabwean organisations. Findings indicated that amongst other things, productivity has reduced for most organisations and managing performance of employees working from home possess an additional challenge for employers. The study also revealed that most Zimbabwean organisations have resorted to restructuring as a way to cope with the new normal; some jobs are being merged whilst others are being discarded totally. Precariousness is increasing in a bid to cut operational costs. Based on these findings, the study concluded teleworking have brought more challenges than opportunities to Zimbabwean organisations. network connectivity. This means that organisation should craft relevant strategies to navigate through these challenges.

Keywords: Teleworking working, challenges, opportunities, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The COVID -19 pandemic has been declared a global crisis as it has equally affected all countries (WHO, 2021). Due to its nature, the pandemic has changed the normal operations of individuals and businesses. In a bid to decongest workplaces, organisations have adopted teleworking so that employees work from their homes (Dapi, 2020). On the 12th of June 2021 the Zimbabwean government announced another lockdown prior other lockdown due to a spike in the COVID 19 cases. One of the regulations governing this lockdown is for organisations to decongest workplaces by fifty percent in both private and public organisations (Zhou, 2021). This move like any other have its opportunities and challenges and this calls for the government and employers to craft strategies that allow seamless transition to teleworking. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is here and what is important is to capitalise on its benefits and try to reduce challenges where possible (Mukhopadhyay & Mukhopadhyay, 2020). This study is going to look at the challenges and opportunities of teleworking in Zimbabwean organisations. This study is important as it shall add knowledge to the already existing literature on teleworking. Many studies on teleworking were conducted in developed countries not much research have been done in the developing countries. Yadav (2019) conducted a study on teleworking in China. The findings revealed that teleworking was very beneficial in fighting COVID 19 because organisations have everything required for teleworking. This concurs with a study conducted by Lu (2019) on teleworking in United Kingdom. The findings indicated that organisations that are practising teleworking had more opportunities in their organisations. The same study indicated that teleworking was useful in curbing the spread of the virulent pandemic in the United Kingdom.

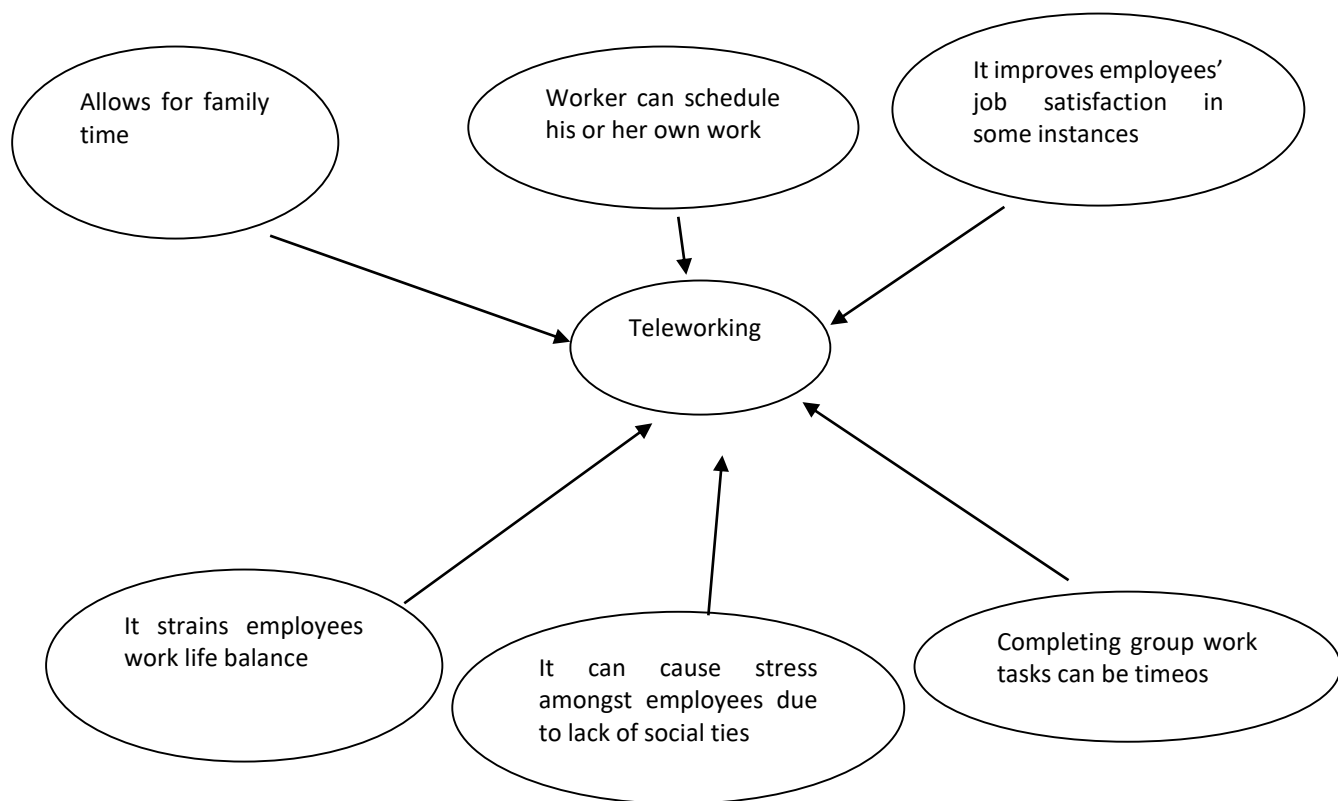
1.2 Research purpose and objectives

- The overall purpose of the study is to evaluate the implications of virtual working in Zimbabwean organisations in the COVID 19 era.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- To determine the opportunities presented by tele working to Zimbabwean organisations.
- To determine the challenges presented by teleworking to Zimbabwean organisations.

1.3 Conceptual Framework



Source: Own Source, 2021

Teleworking can be explained as a scenario whereby employees work away from the employers' premises through the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Eurofound & ILO, 2017). This form of working has benefits and challenges for both the employer and the employee (ILO, 2017). The challenges include stress, lack of work life balance, failure to meet deadlines and targets, job dissatisfaction and low employee morale. Moreso, ILO (2020) posited that organisations benefits from long working hours by employees as they work during evenings and weekends as well. The benefits include flexible scheduling of tasks, likely increase in productivity due to long working hours, time with family and job satisfaction in some cases (ILO, 2020).

1.3.1 Opportunities presented by tele working to organisations.

According to the Institute for Employment Studies (1997), teleworking has a number of opportunities which include job satisfaction, flexible work schedules and new job opportunities which require new skills as it allows for flexible patterns of work such as job sharing. According to IES (1997), employees can enjoy job satisfaction through spending more time with their families. That is, employees work at the same time having their family around them which is not the case when working at the physical place of work. This might increase labour productivity as employees will be having peace of mind. More so, the employees can have job satisfaction through flexible scheduling of their own work within parameters provided by their managers. That is, employees can divide their tasks in hours of the day that suit their personal needs such that they are able to balance the productive and the reproductive work (IES,1997). When this happens, it can boost the morale of employees thereby increasing their productivity.

The institute for Employment Studies (1997) submitted that teleworking can open new job opportunities that requires a new skill set. That is, employees who possess skills contingent to technological changes can be absorbed into employment reducing unemployment. Organisations will benefit from these skilled employees in terms of productivity and fighting competition and this increases their chances to survive.

1.3.2 Challenges presented by teleworking

Since schools and other care facilities had closed, this made teleworking difficult especially female employees. A survey conducted by Eurofound (2020) revealed that 26% of employees had children less than 12 years of age which made their working difficult. These workers find it difficult to balance care responsibilities and work. This has presented new dynamics for managing work life balance to these employees (Eurofound, 2020).

Messenger (2019) posited that employees who work from home work more hours compared to those who work at the physical workplace because travelling time is replaced by work activities. More so that inseparability that exists between paid work and personal life makes teleworking challenging for most employees. A survey by McCulley (2020) has indicated that employees working from home are putting in extra hours .38 % of the respondents revealed that employees working from home are working longer hours than those who are not. The study indicated that 27% of employees who work from home as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic are using up their time to rest in order to meet set targets at work (Eurofound, 2020). These employees were also said to have children who needed care and assistance in so far as home schooling is concerned. This means these employees have to work late in the evening and wake up early in the morning so that they can try to balance these two parallel ends.

Since most organisations retrenched employees due to COVID 19 pandemic, they have been a sudden workload increase leading amongst employees making teleworking a challenge for many employees (ILO, 2017). This has also affected the health and wellbeing of employees as most employees suffered stress and burnout in some instances.

ILO (2017) highlighted that not all jobs can be performed from home. The report highlighted that there are some jobs that can be partially worked from home and others that can only be worked at the physical workplace. For example, a porter cannot work from home.

In addition, Spataro (2020) have indicated that teleworking has also increased pressure for management. He revealed that leading teleworking teams have added an extra 90 minutes per week to the normal working time of managers resulting from meetings online with individual employees. On the other hand, management is playing a pivotal role in supporting employees as a way to reduce the impact of overworking on their health and well-being. This is because teleworking is new for most organisations therefore all parties lack in terms of experience and priorities (Eurasia Review, 2020). More so working away from each other can lead to hold ups and delays as employees might not get the help, they need in order to complete certain specific tasks (Bick et al.,2020). Sometimes the delays by employees are due to lack of know how in using different technological tools.] (Messenger, 2019). Some areas have poor connectivity such that even sending an email is a challenge and this causes delays in completion of tasks and meeting of targets (Gomez-Jordan Moya, 2020). Some areas have serious power cuts and without alternatives such as generators or solar energy at home this might affect labour productivity. In some instances, employees incur additional costs in trying to work from home due to lack of support from the employer (ILO, 2017). Sometimes workers are given unrealistic targets with insufficient resources to carry out the task. This leads to frustration and disengagements amongst employees.

1.4 Theoretical framework

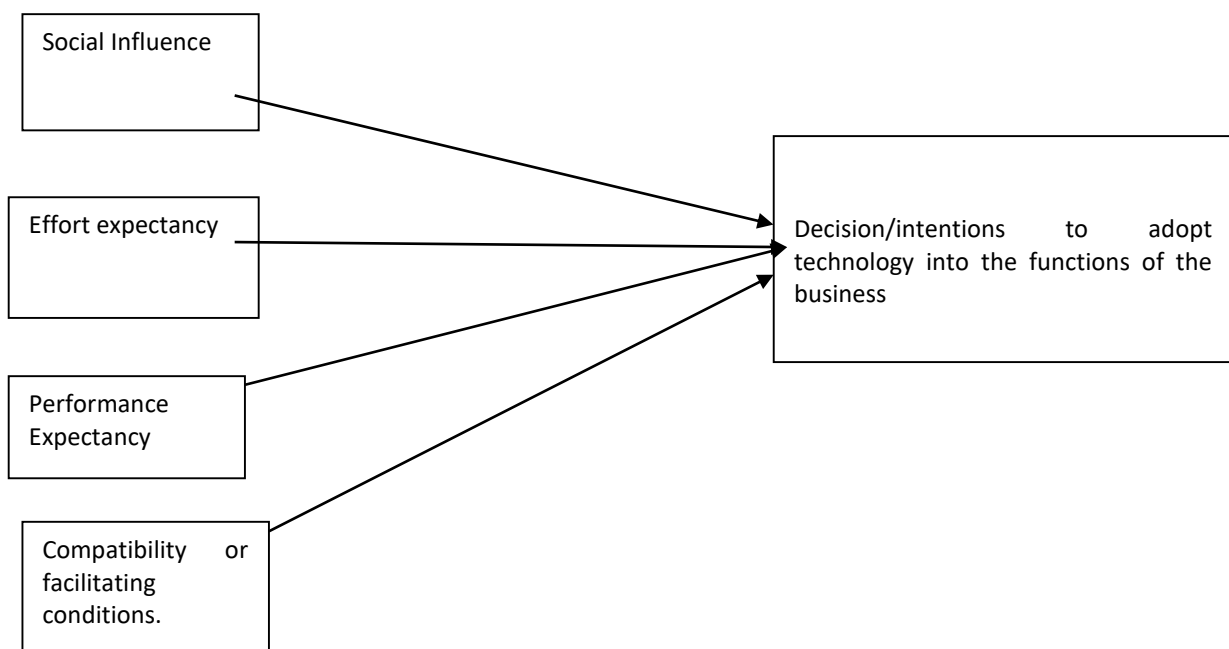


Fig 2 Source: Venkatesh et al (2013)

Since the study is based on a technological driven business environment post COVID 19,prospects and challenges, the figure above depicts a Unified theory of acceptance and Use of Technology model (UTAUT).It was developed by Venkatesh in 2013.This model have four key elements which are social influence ,effort expectancy, performance expectancy and facilitating conditions. Venkatesh (2013) highlights that performance expectancy looks at how much the user of technology benefit from its and the extent to which it enhances the quality of work(Davis eta l,1989).Effort expectancy talks to the extent to which one finds certain technology user friendly (Venkatesh et al,2013).People are comfortable with working with technology that is user friendly which

they see have more advantages than disadvantages. Venkatesh (2013) explains social influence as the extent to which an individual or organisation is influenced by key people in his or her social environment to adopt and use technology. Compatibility or facilitating conditions is explained as the extent to which technical and organisational resources already in place support adoption of new technology (Venkatesh,2013). According to Rodgers (2015) compatibility is the extent to which technology to be adopted matches the technology that already in use by a specific organisation. He emphasised that organisations should ensure there is compatibility of technology before adopting as this can affect smooth flow of the business and increase operational cost.

2. Materials and Methods

The study adopted an online desk-based research. The reason why the researcher opted for this method was that it is alternative research strategy to primary research-related activities that involve face-to-face participation Given the WHO guidelines pertaining the spread of this virulent pandemic the researcher found this method of data collection to be the most suitable. The desk-based research assisted the researcher with information and material from research output from universities, government, journals. International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). The researcher focused on analysing online resources on the opportunities and challenges of teleworking in Zimbabwe.

Data gathered online was analysed and categorized according to the constant comparative method of data analysis. This method for data analysis was propounded by Strauss (1987). The gathered data from the various sources was grouped and was modified during stages of the analysis. Open coding was done as part of the data analysis. Headings were used as codes for different content on a particular subject to enable data analysis and allow for constant comparison of themes emerging from subsequent data. The researcher had to decide what data will be collected next and where to find it.

3. Results

3.1. Opportunities for teleworking

3.1.1. Reduction in operational costs

Findings revealed that teleworking can reduce operational costs for organisations. That is organisations can do away with peripheral employees and remain with those whose purpose is directly linked to the business overall bottom-line. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that organisation can be saved from costs such office rentals, construction of offices and other amenities that are required by employees working at physical offices

3.1.2 Increase in production

Findings revealed that teleworking might increase production of organisations since employees will not waste time travelling to work. Travelling time will be dedicated to production thus an increase in production. The findings indicated that sometimes employees time is lost in congestions and teleworking actually eliminate this problem.

3.1.3 Organisations can attract talented employees globally

Findings revealed that organisations have a chance to attract talented employees globally since there are other talented employees who do not want to relocate or leave away from their families. Through teleworking such employees can be attracted and work from their homes.

3.2 Challenges of teleworking

3.2.1 Non availability of technology and other related resources required

Findings indicated that although organisations are seeing the benefits of teleworking they do not have the financial resources required to work from home. It was revealed that most employees working in Zimbabwean organisations cannot afford to purchase a laptop and even the bundles required to connect to internet. It was revealed that the COVID 19 pandemic have come at a time when most organisations in Zimbabwe are in intensive care unit such that they are not able provide the required accessories.

3.2.2 Poor network connectivity

This was another finding revealed by the study that network connectivity is very poor in most areas. Most areas suffer a short bandwidth which affects internet connectivity and this wastes away production time as employees spend much of their time trying to connect than being productive. It was indicated that an individual can spend the whole day seated due to poor connectivity in their geographical places.

3.2.3 Stress or burnout amongst employees

Since teleworking is a new way of doing things, findings have revealed that most employees are going through stress for so many reasons. One of the reasons was indicated as failure to solve work problems for assigned tasks. Years back employees used to work together physically and sometimes in pool offices such that if one encounters a problem, he or she would be assisted by others but teleworking has created standalone silos for employees. It was highlighted that where one would get assistance sometimes it will not be as clear as on face to face basis and this have caused employees in Zimbabwean organisations to suffer from stress and even burnout.

3.2.4 Lack of technological know how

Findings revealed that most employees in Zimbabwean organisations are suffering from the lack of technological knowhow. It was indicated that some employees do not even have basic computer skills and this new normal have exposed them. Findings revealed that employees under the traditionalists' generation are finding their lives more difficult than the generation Z or millennials who are technologically skilled.

3.2.5 Job losses and temporary jobs for many

Findings revealed that with teleworking most employees are going to lose their jobs with others being placed on temporary contracts. COVID 19 has made organisations realize that they can do without other employees and that other activities can be outsourced when required. It was revealed that organisations are embarking on restructuring exercises leading to job losses for many in the name of efficiency and effectiveness of operations.

3.2.6 Difficulty in managing employee performance

With the coming in of teleworking, findings indicated that organisations were not prepared such that managing performance have become a challenge. Traditional performance appraisal forms have been overtaken by events and this have posed some performance management challenges to organisations. Findings revealed that someone can get a full month salary when in actual fact the person has worked for only a week. This means the organisation will be paying what it is not supposed to pay. This calls for action and strategy from all organisations before they are forced to close shop.

3.2.7 Unconducive working environments

Since people are now working or moving towards working from home findings have revealed that most home environments are not conducive. It was revealed that with the meagre earnings that most employees are earnings they afford rental in high density suburbs where people are densely populated and it is noisy. People barely concentrate well in such environments and inability to pay child minders for many particularly women employees has accelerated the challenge.

4. Discussion

4.1 Opportunities for teleworking

4.1.1 Reduction in operational costs

Findings have revealed that teleworking can reduce the operational costs for Zimbabwean organisations. This means that if organisations can capitalize on it very well they will no longer incur office rentals costs, car parking and even construction of offices or physical buildings. This was supported by an almost similar study Makamba (2020) which revealed that teleworking relieves organisations need for offices or buildings in general as all employees will now be working from home. He indicated that this saves organisations money which in turn manifest as high profits. In the same study, lack of set up costs by organisations was indicated as the major limitations. Organisations were seen to be lacking the required investment to ensure employees work from home and reduce or avoid the spread of the COVID 19 pandemic.

4.1.2 Increase in production

Findings have revealed that teleworking can lead to an increase in production. This means that since employees will no longer be travelling to work that time will be used for production. This is supported by an almost similar study by Moyo(2020) which revealed that employees lost greater part of production time in congestion which if it committed to production organisations could have been much better. The same study indicated that having employees confined in one place ensures all energy and concentration of employees is on production and given the Zimbabwean economic status organisations can capitalize on that.

4.1.3 Organisations can attract talented employees globally

As highlighted in the findings there are other talented employees who could not join our organisations for reasons such as unwillingness to relocate and leave their families. With teleworking, Zimbabwean organisations can attract such employees. This is in line with a study conducted by Lu (2019) in china which indicated that

there are some talented employees who are not willing to relocate from their homes and leave behind their families but with teleworking such employees can be taken on board. The same study revealed that such talented employees can take organisations to higher levels since human resource is the only resource that can give an organisation competitive advantage over its employees.

4.2 Challenges of teleworking

4.2.1 Non availability of technology and other related resources required

The findings have revealed that organisations lack the initial investment to have technology and accessories required in place. This means that organisation do not have the financial muscle given the prevailing economic situation in Zimbabwe. COVID 19 came as a blow to already ailing Zimbabwean businesses. This is in line with a study that was conducted by Yadav (2019) which revealed that organisations do not have the financial muscle to purchase laptops and other accessories required for the employees to work online. The same study indicated that organisations were caught unaware such that they do not have budget for the accessories.

4.2.2 Poor network connectivity

As highlighted in the findings above, lack or poor network is one of the challenges for teleworking for organisations in Zimbabwe. This is in line with a survey conducted by Afro band (2021) which indicates that working from home in Zimbabwe might not bring the desired outcomes due too poor network connectivity. The same study revealed that most areas have connectivity challenges which makes teleworking a challenge for most Zimbabwean organisations. The study indicated that instead of teleworking they have simply reduced the number of days that employees report for duty so as to decongest workplaces and reduce the spread of the virulent pandemic.

4.2.3 Stress or burnout amongst employees

The findings have revealed that most employees are suffering stress or burnout due to working from home. This is in line with a study conducted by Moyo(2020) which revealed that teleworking has exposed employees to stress and burnout for some reasons. The first reason was that employees suffer learned helplessness because they do not have anyone to ask where they are not clear. Unlike the traditional workplaces, employees used to consult each other but with teleworking this is not possible. The study indicated that it is this 'learned helplessness' that have made employees to suffer stress and even burnout in some instances. The other reason that was highlighted was that of loneliness said that employees are social animals who works best when socializing so if the socializing is eliminated, they suffer stress (Mayo, 2012). Lastly the feeling of insecurity was also said to expose employees to stress. According to the study conducted by Moyo (2020) employees feel insure when working from home than when working from the physical workplace. This is in line with Bick et al (2020) study which revealed that when employees are working away from each other suffer from stress since sometimes they come across challenges they cannot solve alone.

4.2.4 Lack of technological knowhow

As revealed by the findings most employees lack technological knowhow which affects teleworking. This is in line with a study conducted by Lu (2019) which revealed that employees lack of technological knowhow affects tele working. It highlighted that old aged employees find it difficult to cope with teleworking than the young

employees. Generation Z were indicated to be more technological savvy than the traditionalist making teleworking difficult to achieve the set goals. Zhou (2021) indicated that teleworking in the Zimbabwean Public sector will take some time to yield positive results since it is densely populated with the traditionalist generation in most of its department. This is also in line with literature by Gomez-Jordan Moya, (2020) which highlighted that lack of technological knowhow affects productivity when teleworking.

4.2.5 Job losses and temporary jobs for many

As indicated by the findings teleworking will in future lead to job losses as organisations will be realizing they can do without some employees. A report by ILO (2020) revealed that teleworking can have ripple effects on some employees' especially peripheral employees. Through teleworking organisations will be able to sieve key employees from the rest and this might lead to job losses in some cases. The same study indicated that those employees who survive job losses will be put on temporary or short-term contracts. This shifts the burden employee career development and welfare from the employer to the employee affecting the already affected employee. This is also in line with ILO (2020) report which indicated that most employees lost their job due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

4.2.6 Difficulty in managing employee performance

As indicated in the findings teleworking have made performance management difficult for most organisations if not all organisations. This means that it is difficult to manage employees who are remote especially where there are no proper performance management systems. This concurs with a study by Lu (2019) which indicated that performance management for employees who are teleworking is very difficult. The same study indicated that employees who work from home sometimes misuse work time. This means that organisations can pay for what they are not supposed to pay for that is unrendered services. Brown (2020) highlighted that if organisations do not have proper performance management for teleworking they risk paying for what they are not supposed to pay. He highlighted that employees are supposed to work 8hours a day but if there is no systems in place to ensure that they are being fully utilized for production they might be abused by employees. Employees can give divided attention, practice double dipping if there are no proper performance management system (Brown, 2020). In his study he highlighted that employees can work for more organisations and still get their full remuneration from their primary employers. This is also in line with literature by Spataro (2020) which highlighted that managing employees working from home is not easy and it has increased pressure on management.

4.2.7 Unconducive working environments

As indicated in the findings teleworking can be affected by unconducive working environments. This means that some employees might be staying in environments that are not conducive for work. For instance, noisy and densely populated environments. This is in line with a study conducted by (Moyo,2020) which indicated that employees might be hindered from their remote working due to unconducive environments that they stay in .The same study indicated a gendered perspective that female employees are the mostly affected since they find it very difficult to separate productive work from the reproductive work. There were said to be juggling between care giving work and the productive work and they are expected to deliver on both ends. This is also in

line with literature by McCulley (2020) which highlighted that most employees find it difficult working from home since they have children who need their care and assistance in school work.

5. Limitations and recommendations

The limitations of the study were that it only covered Zimbabwean organisations in a particular province. The researcher recommends that the study be conducted at a much larger scale to bring out a broader picture on the challenges and opportunities of teleworking in Zimbabwean organisations. In light of the indicated challenges the study made the following recommendations:

- Government should assist organisations with funding so that they can access the required technological accessories for their employees to work from home. This funding will also go a long way in helping organisations to train their employees in requisite skills.
- Organisations should put in place Human Resource Development programs to equip their employees with requisite skills.
- Organisations should work towards increasing their network bandwidth so that there is improved network connectivity.
- Organisations should revise their rewards so that employees can afford rentals in decent residential places where teleworking is possible. More so, living wage will also help employees to hire and pay childcare services particularly female employees.
- Organisations should put in place proper performance management systems so that they pay those who are supposed to be paid and not vice versa. Zoom meetings and frequent updates online from both employees and managers will go a long way in assisting in the proper management of performance.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion there are more challenges than opportunities for teleworking in Zimbabwean organisations. Although teleworking has the chance to reduce operational cost, increase efficiency and effectiveness in Zimbabwean organisations there are so many problems associated with it. Employees do not have the laptops and other accessories required to work online and this affects full implementation of teleworking in Zimbabwean organisations. Poor connectivity in most geographical areas around Zimbabwe is another factor revealed as affecting effectiveness of teleworking. There is also lack of technological know-how in some employees particularly the traditionalist generation and this means organisations should set aside resources for Human Resource Development Programs. Stress or burnout was also revealed as another challenge for teleworking and organisations should try to introduce online assistance and counseling so that employees do not suffer stress or burnout. Unconduciveness of working environment was also revealed as another challenge for teleworking. This means organisations should revise their salaries and wages so that employees can afford rentals in decent residential places which are quiet and spacious. This will also assist employees to be in a position to hire and pay child minders which in this current situation looks impossible for many employees. Challenge in managing

employee performance among other Challenges listed in the findings was revealed as another challenge of teleworking which means organisations need to put in place proper online performance management systems.

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