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Towards Sustainable Inclusion: IFTCR Framework for Diverse and Equitable Remote Work Environment in IT Industry

Suryaprakash.C.T¹

Abstract:

Remote work has become increasingly prevalent, offering flexibility and accessibility to employees worldwide. However, ensuring inclusivity and diversity in remote workspaces presents unique challenges. This paper explores the integration of theoretical frameworks and sustainable practices to foster inclusivity and diversity in remote work environments. Challenges and opportunities of remote work in IT Industry are identified. IFTCR Framework is proposed to address these challenges, making the remote work environment sustainable and inclusive.

Key Words: Sustainable Inclusion, Remote Work, Diversity, Equity, Environmental Practices

1. Introduction:

The proliferation of remote work has transformed the landscape of modern employment, offering unprecedented flexibility and accessibility to employees worldwide. Enabled by advances in technology and shifting attitudes towards workplace flexibility, remote work has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional office-based employment arrangements. However, while remote work presents numerous benefits, including increased autonomy and reduced commuting time, it also poses unique challenges, particularly in fostering inclusivity and diversity within remote workspaces.

As remote work continues to gain prominence in IT Industry, organizations grapple with the task of creating equitable and inclusive work environments that accommodate diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and needs. In traditional office settings, strategies for promoting inclusivity and diversity often rely on physical proximity, face-to-face interactions, and established organizational structures. However, the virtual nature of remote work introduces

¹ MBA student, Department of Management studies, CEG, Anna University, Chennai.

new complexities, requiring innovative approaches to address inclusion and diversity effectively.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to explore the sustainable practices to foster inclusivity and diversity in remote work environments.

2. Literature Review

De Klerk and Palmer (2021) highlights the pressing need to address systemic inequalities and promote equitable learning opportunities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on rural schools in South Africa's Northern Cape province, the research reveals the challenges of providing inclusive education, particularly in remote learning contexts. The study underscores the exacerbation of existing disparities, including limited digital access and proficiency. Despite these obstacles, school principals demonstrate a commitment to prioritizing inclusion and collaborative problem-solving to overcome educational disparities. Emphasizing the importance of flexible teaching practices and technological advancements, the paper advocates for inclusive approaches to meet the evolving demands of remote and online learning. This research aligns with efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity in remote work environments, highlighting the interconnectedness of educational equity and sustainable development goals.

In the discourse on healthy urbanism and sustainable development, Pineo (2020) presents the THRIVES framework, advocating for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban design and planning. This framework recognizes the adverse health impacts of environmental degradation and widening inequalities, particularly among marginalized groups. By addressing these disparities from the design stage onwards, THRIVES offers a holistic approach to promoting human well-being in urban development. Pineo's work emphasizes the urgent need for urban governance prioritizing equity, inclusion, and sustainability to address environmental and social challenges. Aligned with sustainable development goals, THRIVES complements initiatives fostering inclusivity and diversity in remote workspaces, emphasizing the interconnectedness of sustainability efforts across society.

In higher education, institutions are recognized as pivotal contributors to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Wright et al. (2023) illuminate the evolving landscape of higher education institutions (HEIs) amid global sustainability challenges, emphasizing the necessity for collaborative cultures to address complex issues. Aligned with UNESCO's call for diverse and inclusive sustainable development (2017), HEIs uniquely leverage their capacities for SDG advancement through intentional collaborations. This collaborative ethos positions HEIs to act as change agents, engage with the knowledge economy, prioritize student-centered learning, and fulfil societal responsibilities (Wright et al., 2023). Extending this discourse, our research explores sustainable inclusion in remote workspaces, integrating theoretical frameworks, principles, and sustainable practices to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion aligned with SDGs 3 and 9.

3. Theoretical Framework:

3.1 Social Identity Theory:

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from the groups they belong to and tend to favour their in-group over out-groups. In the context of remote work, understanding how employees perceive themselves and others within remote teams is crucial for promoting inclusivity and diversity. By acknowledging and addressing the social identities present within remote teams, organizations can implement strategies to mitigate biases and foster a sense of belonging for all employees.

3.2 Equity Theory:

Equity Theory suggests that individuals compare their inputs and outcomes to those of others and seek fairness in their relationships. When applied to remote work arrangements, perceptions of fairness in terms of workload distribution, recognition, and opportunities for advancement are critical for employee engagement and satisfaction. Organizations must ensure transparent processes for task allocation, promotions, and rewards in remote work environments to maintain equity and mitigate feelings of injustice among employees. Presence equal opportunities in remote work, provides the base to evaluate and reward.

3.3 Intersectionality:

Intersectionality recognizes that individuals hold multiple social identities that intersect and interact, leading to unique experiences and challenges. In remote workspaces, factors such as race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status intersect to shape employees' experiences and opportunities. Organizations must acknowledge and address these intersecting dimensions of diversity to create inclusive remote work environments where all employees feel valued and respected, regardless of their multiple identities.

3.4 Communication Theory:

Communication Theory emphasizes the importance of effective communication in fostering collaboration, cohesion, and understanding within teams. In remote work settings, communication challenges such as misinterpretation, lack of non-verbal cues, and time zone differences can hinder inclusivity and diversity efforts. Employing diverse communication channels, providing training on remote communication best practices, and fostering a culture of open and transparent communication can enhance inclusivity and mitigate communication-related barriers in remote workspaces.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

4.1 Technological Infrastructure:

Despite the proliferation of digital technologies, disparities in technological infrastructure persist, posing challenges for remote work inclusivity. In regions with inadequate internet connectivity or limited access to technology, employees may face barriers to full participation in remote work activities. Addressing these challenges requires investment in infrastructure development, including expanding broadband access and providing subsidies for technology acquisition.

4.2 Inclusion of Marginalized Groups:

Remote work environments may inadvertently exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly for marginalized groups facing systemic barriers to access and advancement. Factors such as socioeconomic status, disability, and geographic location can disproportionately affect individuals' ability to participate fully in remote work. Organizations must proactively address these disparities by implementing inclusive policies and practices that accommodate diverse needs and promote equitable opportunities for all employees. This includes offering flexible work arrangements, providing accommodations for individuals with disabilities, and implementing diversity and inclusion training programs to foster a culture of belonging and respect.

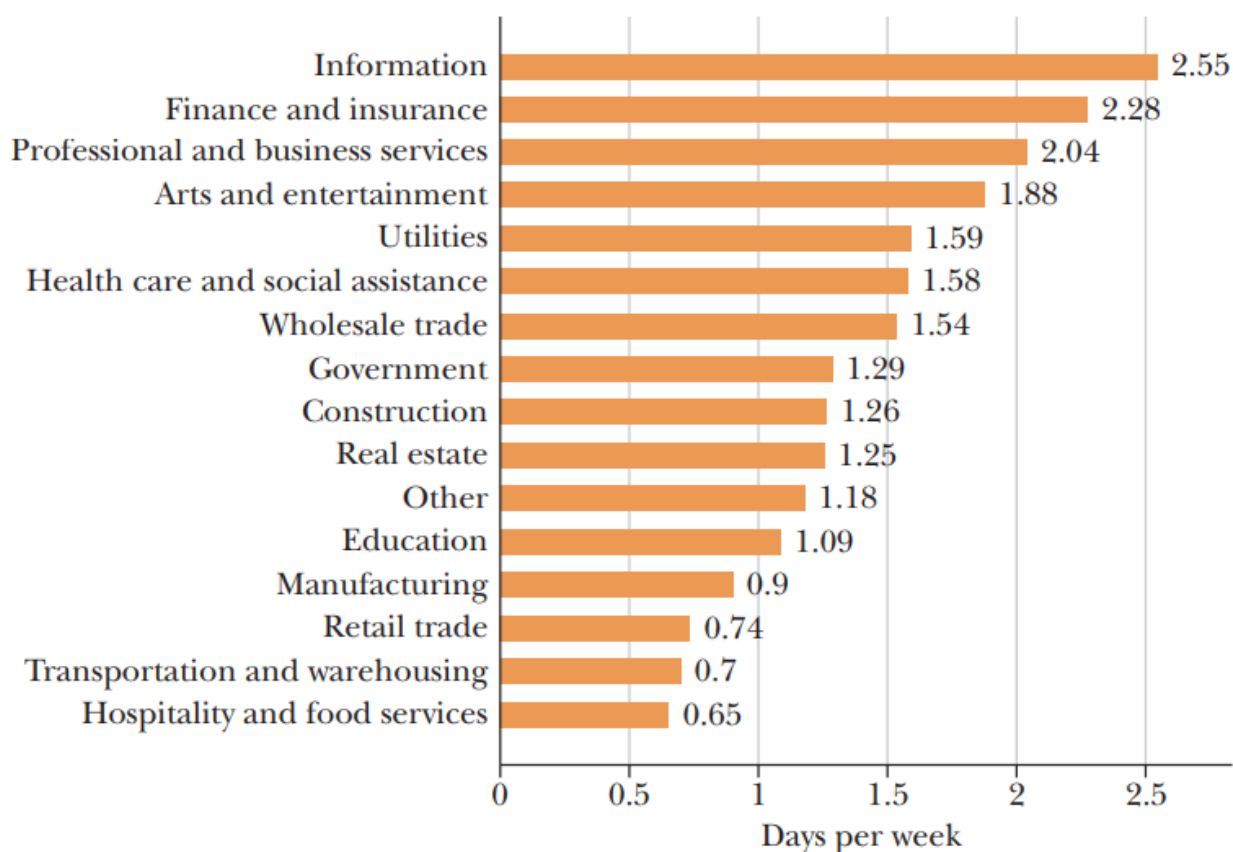


Fig 4.1 US Work-from-Home Rates by Industry Sector in 2023, Employees Who Work Five or More Days per Week

The data indicates requirement of diverse work from home policies with respect to different industrial sectors. Another data to substantiate the requirement of diverse work from home policies based on demographic (age) categories is given below. It indicates that there is no one-stop solution to address work from home issues in its entirety and the policies have to incur changes periodically.

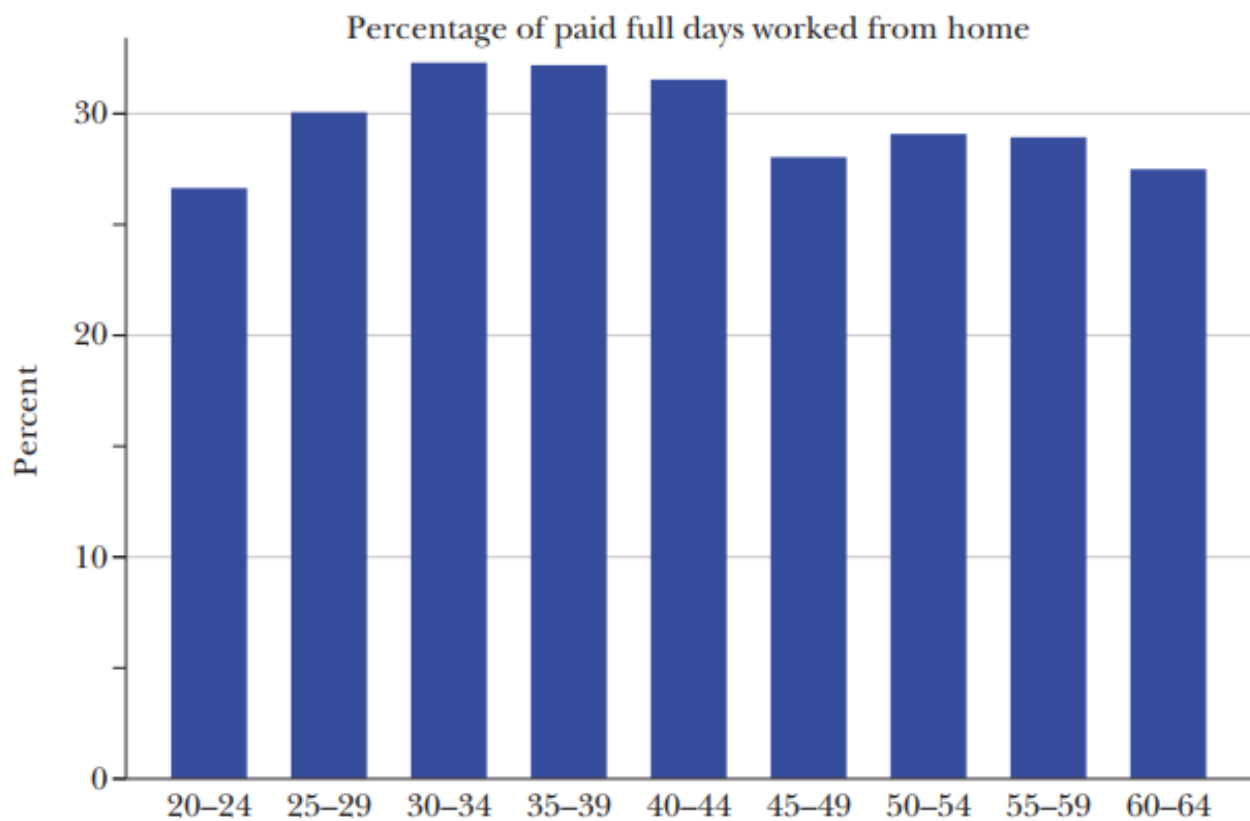


Fig 4.2 Percentage of paid full days worked from home

	Fully onsite (1)	Hybrid arrangement (2)	Fully remote (3)	Percent of all workers (4)
All workers	55.9	28.6	15.5	100
Self-employed, excluding contactors and gig workers	24.9	26.8	48.3	7.4
Contractors and gig workers	32.9	22.7	44.4	3.3
All employees	59.3	29	11.8	89.3
In firms with 1 to 9 employees	67.5	17.6	14.9	7.1
In firms with 10 to 49 employees	68.3	24.1	7.6	14.2
In firms with 50 to 99 employees	57.2	34.1	8.7	13.3
In firms with 100 to 499 employees	56.5	32.4	11.2	19.7
In firms with 500 to 4,999 employees	50.7	37.7	11.6	19.6
In firms with more than 5,000 employees	63.5	18.8	17.8	15.3
Government employees, excluding the armed forces	59.7	27	13.3	3.9

Fig 4.3 Full-Time Working Arrangements in the United States as of 2023, Percentage Distributions

4.3 Organizational Culture:

Building a positive organizational culture is crucial for fostering inclusivity and diversity in remote work environments. However, maintaining a strong sense of community and shared values can be challenging when team members are geographically dispersed. To

cultivate an inclusive organizational culture, leaders must prioritize communication, transparency, and trust-building initiatives. This includes regularly communicating organizational goals and values, recognizing and celebrating diversity, and fostering opportunities for virtual team bonding activities. By fostering a sense of belonging and collective identity, organizations can strengthen their remote teams and promote inclusivity and diversity across all levels of the organization.

Research conducted by Teresa et al. indicates the importance of supportive behaviour and interconnectedness in college isolation and task interdependence. Company isolation and loneliness are negatively associated with task interdependence and supportive behaviour and Company isolation is negatively associated with workplace wellbeing.

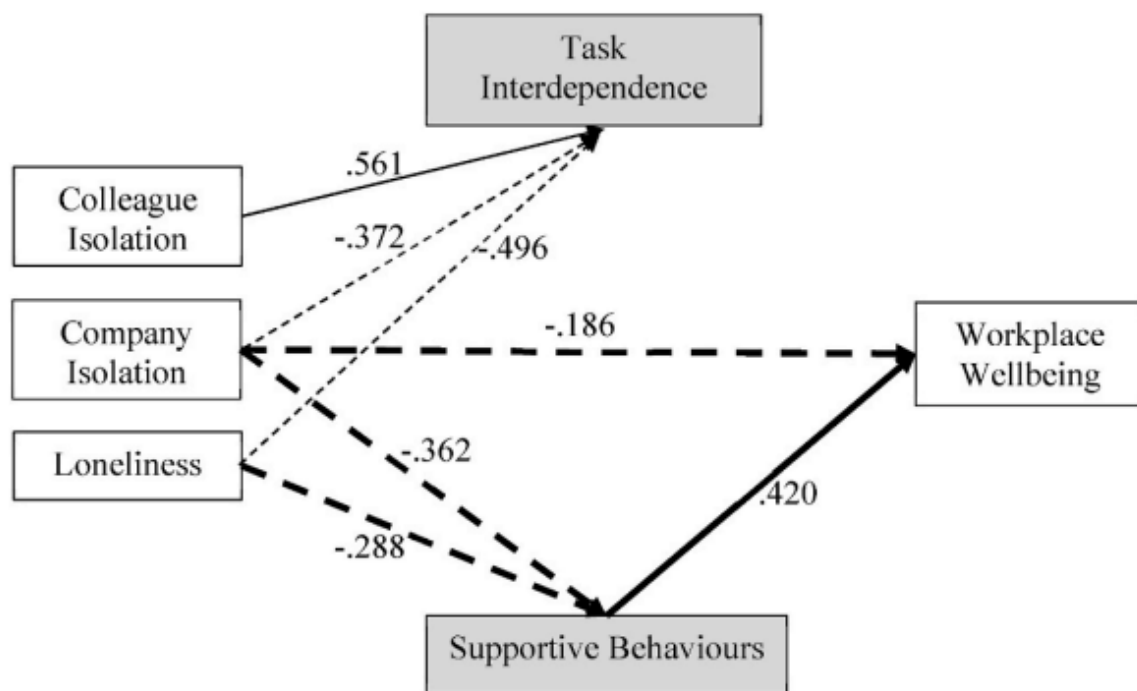


Fig 4.4 Workplace isolation, loneliness and wellbeing at work

5. IFTCR Framework:

5.1 Identification:

It is important to identify what diversifies the current workforce in a remote workspace. Identification of problem enables the organization to formulate necessary policies and solutions to cater the needs.

Based on capacity/access to technology, network and appliances and individual's level of proficiency with respect to usage of these resources, a company's human resource can be classified into the below mentioned matrix.

		PROFICIENCY	
		LOW	HIGH
CAPACITY	LOW		
	HIGH		

Fig 5.1 Human Resource Classification Matrix

5.2 Formulation:

Adopting flexible work policies that accommodate diverse needs and preferences is critical for promoting inclusivity and diversity in remote workspaces. Additionally, providing resources and support for caregivers, individuals with disabilities, and other marginalized groups can help ensure equitable access to remote work opportunities and promote a culture of inclusion. Digital Inclusion initiatives aim to bridge the digital divide by ensuring equitable access to technology and internet connectivity for all employees. In remote work environments, providing resources such as laptops, internet stipends, and training on digital tools and platforms can enhance digital literacy and accessibility for employees with diverse backgrounds and abilities. By prioritizing digital inclusion, organizations can empower all employees to participate fully in remote work activities, regardless of their technological proficiency or resources.

5.3 Training:

Investing in diversity and inclusion training programs is essential for raising awareness, building cultural competence, and fostering inclusive behaviours among remote employees and managers. These programs should address topics such as unconscious bias, cross-cultural communication, and creating inclusive remote work environments. Additionally, providing ongoing professional development opportunities and mentorship programs can help employees from underrepresented groups overcome barriers to advancement and thrive in remote work settings.

5.4 Communication:

Effective communication is essential for remote teams to collaborate efficiently and maintain cohesion. However, remote communication presents unique challenges, including misinterpretation of messages, cultural differences, and time zone disparities. To overcome these challenges, organizations must invest in communication tools that facilitate real-time interaction and foster a sense of connection among remote team members. Additionally, promoting clear communication norms, providing cross-cultural communication training, and scheduling regular virtual meetings can enhance communication effectiveness and mitigate the impact of distance on team dynamics.

5.5 Recreation:

Community Engagement initiatives encourage remote employees to actively participate in local communities and sustainable initiatives. Team Cycling activity is a sustainable outing which also signifies the importance of ensuring good health in remote work culture. Weekend initiative to prepare home food wherein challenge can be increased with the task of fire-less cooking can be an effective sustainable recreation activity because good health and good food are inseparable. Clearing unnecessary files from digital and physical storage is another activity which becomes essential in a remote work culture. Overall, it is the task of HR manger to design effective recreation activities that aligns with their organizational culture and also constrained to be sustainable.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, IFTCR Framework for fostering sustainable inclusion in diverse and equitable remote work environments is essential for driving organizational success and societal impact. By drawing from theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory, Equity Theory, Intersectionality, and Communication Theory, organizations can gain insights into the dynamics of remote work environments and develop strategies to promote inclusivity and diversity. Moreover, implementing sustainable practices can contribute to creating environmentally conscious and socially responsible remote work cultures.

Furthermore, investing in training and education initiatives is crucial for raising awareness, building cultural competence, and fostering inclusive behaviours among remote employees and managers. Providing resources and support for diverse recruitment efforts can also help organizations attract and retain talent from underrepresented groups, thereby enriching the creative process and driving innovation.

In summary, by embracing the principles of sustainable inclusion and leveraging the power of remote work, organizations can create diverse, equitable, and environmentally conscious work environments that not only benefit employees but also contribute to broader societal goals of health, well-being, and sustainable development. Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to continuous improvement, organizations can pave the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future of work.

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