

Flexible Public Service Delivery: Views, Challenges, and Prospects of Government Workers in Times of Pandemic

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Abstract

The alternative work arrangements implemented in public organizations at the onset of the pandemic influence both work and life of public servants. The current study explored the advantages of alternative work arrangements followed by the employees of the local government units in Bataan. It also determined the organizational support of the organization to the employees for continuous and effective delivery of services during the pandemic. The study employed a quantitative descriptive study via online and face-to-face survey questionnaire from 200 respondents, recruited through snowball sampling, from the city/municipalities and the provincial government of Bataan. Using inferential statistics, the study analyzed how the advantages of alternative work arrangements and organizational support differ considering the sociodemographic characteristics. Moreover, the study explored the association between alternative work arrangements and organizational support. Results of the descriptive statistics revealed that the alternative work arrangement was relatively advantageous to the employees and that the organization was relatively supportive of the new work setup. No significant difference was observed in the advantages of alternative work arrangements. While there was no statistical difference in organizational support, respondents with single civil status reported receiving greater support than married ones. A positive moderate correlation was observed between the alternative work arrangements and organizational support. Results indicated that almost twenty percent of the variability in the alternative work arrangement can be explained by the variability in organizational support. The findings contribute to a better understanding of alternative work arrangements and organizational support, as well as practical recommendations for increasing the benefits to employees and maintaining productivity while enjoying work-life balance.

Keywords: remote work, organizational support, public service delivery

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic which affected almost an entire part of the world, the entire island of Luzon, Philippines was placed under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) on March 16, 2020. Under ECQ, strict home quarantine was implemented in all households, transportation was suspended, and provisions for food and essential services were regulated. Even though almost the entire population of the confined region has stopped working, the government, as the major responder to pandemic emergencies, must not only continue but even intensify its efforts to meet the people's basic needs. This

pandemic crisis not only posed a challenge to public and private health workers in keeping people safe, but public servants also played a key part in the response to the pandemic. As public workers continue to work, a balance must be struck between keeping them safe and expecting consistent and effective service delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled them to take drastic measures, such as switching to entirely new modes of working and even re-imagining new forms of working to meet the new pandemic's demands (Ancillo, 2021). Consequently, public sector employees are being challenged to work in new ways and new circumstances. In South Korea, for example, the government issued mandatory procedures on work-from-home staff while some senior managers remain in the office with safeguards such as staggered lunch hours and physical distancing (OECD, 2020). In the Philippines, the Civil Service Commission (CSC) mandated government agencies to adopt any or a combination of the following alternative work arrangements: work-from-home, skeletal workforce, four-day (compressed) workweek, work shifting/flexible (staggered) working hours, and other alternative work arrangement (CSC MC. No. 18, s, 2020).

As public servants face this novel path in their job, with new ways of doing things, and new challenges, they will naturally experience strain and pressure because of the changes. Some of these challenges and strains include risking burnout, sick leave, demotivation, and lower performance ((Shuster, et. al., 2020). In the study of Liss-Levinson (2020), 55 percent of respondents to a 2020 national online survey of US public employees reported having trouble adjusting to remote work. The negative impact was closely linked to a reduction in leisure time and an increase in the number of caring responsibilities. Work-from-home arrangements also lead employees to overwork due to blurring boundaries between work and family duties, and social isolation as employees need to independently deprive of healthy physical and social interaction with co-workers (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). Since most works are to be performed remotely and digitally, factors such as lack of devices, lack of knowledge and skills in the use of devices and software applications, and limited internet connectivity exacerbate their difficult situation.

Conversely, the results of Vyas and Butakhieo (2021) study suggest that a work-from-home arrangement is perceived to be advantageous as it may result in decreased work-related stress, more time to rest, and improvement in work-life balance. Likewise, Bezzina, et. al. (2021) concluded in their study on remote working in the Maltese public service during the pandemic, in most circumstances, remote working reduces stress, increases employee flexibility, and improves staff effectiveness.

Nonetheless, the disparate perceptions on the impact of a pandemic on public servants' work highlight the need to assess this impact to ensure that they can continue to deliver an optimal level of effectiveness and that their productivity is not reduced without jeopardizing their physical, psychological, and mental well-being. Consequently, there is a need to re-frame how public employees are managed and should be managed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the new situation. As such, research is needed to assess how the alternative work arrangement adopted in local government units pursuant to the provisions of Memorandum Circular No. 18, April 2020 affected the work of public workers. Hence, this study intended to examine the advantages of the alternative work arrangement of public servants and its relation to organizational support in the local government units of Bataan province. The findings of the study intended to provide essential information to public managers about how the new working arrangements of their employees affect their work, which will be very useful in designing new employee work plans and assignments.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to assess the effects of the alternative working arrangement on the work of public servants employed in the local government units of Bataan province. Specifically, it pursued to answer the following objectives:

1. to determine the differences in the effects of alternative work arrangement and organization support to the employees in terms of their profiles;
2. to determine the relationship between the effects of alternative work arrangement and organizational support;
3. to provide insights and policy recommendations for sustained productivity and effectiveness of service delivery by public servants during the pandemic.

Methodology

Research Design. Considering the main objective was to gain an in-depth understanding of the effect of alternative work arrangements on the work of public servants, a quantitative descriptive research design was used for this study. Specifically, the descriptive survey method was employed to gather data which was analyzed statistically.

Population and Sample. The study's target population was the municipal/city government employees including the provincial government of Bataan who have adopted an alternative work arrangement in accordance with the Civil Service Commission's regulations. To get the appropriate sample size for this study, the researcher used power analysis. Based on the calculation of the G*Power application with an alpha error of 0.05 and 0.95 power at 0.3 effect size, the appropriate sample for this research was 196. The researchers decided to recruit 200 respondents which were recruited through the snowball sampling method. As part of the study's ethical considerations, recruits were asked for their consent before participation. Participants included in the sample were based on the following specific criteria. The public servant must: hold a clerical, technical, supervisory, or managerial position, have had at least three-month work experiences in the organization prior to the first lockdown implemented in the province; be either permanent or contractual if he or she has worked in the organization continuously from before the outbreak of the pandemic to present; and be willing to participate. Commissioned-based or project-based employees or consultants are excluded from the sample. Employees who have not adopted any of the alternative work arrangements provided in the CSC, MC No. 18, s. 2020 was also excluded from the study.

Research Instrument. The research instrument used in this study was a self-made questionnaire that was composed of three parts. The first part was the demographic profile of the respondents including the type of alternative work arrangement he or she follows. The second part, the degree of advantage of the alternative work arrangement to public servant's work, consisted of sixteen items. The last part, Organizational support, composed of 10 items, aimed to measure the extent of support provided by the local government units to its employees for continuous effective delivery of services. To ensure the questionnaire's content validity, subject-matter experts were engaged. Additionally, twenty selected public servants from the concerned local government units were pilot tested to establish the questionnaire's reliability and internal consistency. The questionnaire was in the form of an online survey using a web-based online survey platform and hard copies that target participants can complete over the internet or by directly filling out hard copies of survey forms.

Treatment of Data. Frequency or percentage distribution was used to display the profile of the respondents. The weighted mean was utilized to describe the perception of the respondents on alternative

work arrangements and organizational support. Further, independent samples t-test and Analysis of Variance were employed to determine the significant difference in the perceptions of alternative work arrangement and organizational support in terms of profile. ANOVA does not indicate where the significant difference lies, the Tukey–HSD was used as a post-comparison tool. Pearson r correlation coefficient was implemented to establish the relationship between alternative work arrangements and organizational support.

Results and Discussions

1. Demographic Profile

A total of 200 employees from the local government units completed the questionnaire. The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample revealed that most of the respondents are relatively young with a mean age of 36 years. In general, females, in clerical positions and with three to five family members dominate the sample. Overall, in terms of civil status, the study sample seems to be a good representation of the target. It is noticeable also that the working arrangement of many of the respondents was skeletal force followed by a work-from-home set-up.

2. Advantages of Alternative Work Arrangement

The overall mean rating of 3.14 shows that respondents perceive the new work set as somewhat advantageous, particularly in the aspect of being able to meet their family and personal needs. Working at home, reduced commuting time and not going regularly going to the office provided them more time to attend to family needs and to run personal errands. As posited in the study of Allan & Miglani (2020), employees enjoy greater flexibility and control over their personal and professional lives in a work-from-home setup. However, the results revealed that the items with which the respondents agreed the least were the statements about “not feeling tired and drained physically and emotionally” and “having more time to relax and enjoy myself”. This could be interpreted as employees tend to be busy working from home, hence more tiresome. The situation can be attributed to work overload as they juggle the responsibilities of their office work and family demands. It is also more difficult for those who have children who require physical care or who require guidance in their distance or online education. This negative experience is related to the survey conducted by Eurofound (2020) which claimed that women had more difficulty balancing work and personal life than males, particularly those with children under the age of 12. In relation to this, the study of Tusi, et. al. (2021) claims that an increase in caring duties, as well as, perhaps more surprisingly, an increase and decrease in leisure time, were strongly associated with the perceived deterioration of work life; such changes in private life routines may necessitate readjustments that can interfere with work and work-life balance.

3. Organizational Support

The alternative working arrangements of the employees require additional support from the organization to ensure that employees have the right tools and resources to be as productive as would be at the office. Results of the study revealed that the respondents found their organization somewhat supportive. Organizational support was found to be high in terms of providing adequate employee protection against the virus and the control of the spread of infection. This suggested that health care protocol is strongly maintained and enforced in their work’s vicinity. Furthermore, the organizations were

able to create efficient strategies for workers to complete their primary responsibilities amid the pandemic, such as streamlining procedures, effectively communicating the work plan and deliverables of the employees, and maintaining open communication by the management. This suggests that the local government units were able to adapt to the demands of the challenging and novel circumstances. The local government units were nevertheless able to provide services to the public despite the alternate working arrangement. What needs to be improved, on the other hand, is the provision of material resources needed for remote work such as gadgets, laptops, and other communication platforms like video conferencing. These are essentials in keeping employees connected and performing their functions effectively and efficiently. Agoncillo, et.al. (2021) pointed out in their study that information technology infrastructure and digital skills development must be prioritized to address remote working and work flexibility. They also asserted that training in remote working tools and technologies, using technology to collect data, using digital technology, and establishing in-house and remote access are the key factors in effective remote working.

4. Comparison of the Perceptions of the Advantages of the Alternative Work Arrangement in Terms of Profile

Table 1
Comparison of the Respondents' Perceptions of the Advantages of the Alternative Work Arrangement in Terms of Profile

Profile	Group	p-value	Remarks
Sex	Male	.544	Do not Reject Ho
	Female		
Civil Status	Single	.204	Do not Reject Ho
	Married		
Family Members	3-5	.479	Do not Reject Ho
	6 or more		
Age	18-29yo	.207	Do not Reject Ho
	30-39yo		
	40-49yo		
	50yo & above		
Position	Clerical	.265	Do not Reject Ho
	Technical		
	Supervisory		
Work Set Up	Managerial	.069	Do not Reject Ho
	Work from Home		
	Skeletal Workforce		
	Four-day Workweek		
	Shifting/Flexible Working Hrs.		

**significant at 0.01; ns—not significant at 0.05 level. n-number of cases; M-Mean; SD-Standard Deviation; Group mean ratings with common letter/s is/are not significantly different at .05 level. For t-test: df=198; For F-test: df between=3; df within=196; df total=199.

On the objective of determining the significant difference in the advantages of alternative working arrangements in relation to the respondents' profile, the findings revealed that no significant difference between or among categories in each sociodemographic characteristic. This means that regardless of sex, age, civil status, job position, and the number of family members, the degree of advantage of the alternative working arrangements is the same. On the contrary, several studies found that sex and age are significant factors in remote working. On sex, for example, women experienced more difficulties in

combining work and private life than men, particularly when it came to feeling too tired after work to do household work according to Eurofound (2020). This could be explained by the findings that women were generally more involved in caring for children and doing household chores. Moreover, doing multiple tasks at home such as household chores, childcare, office meeting, etc., experienced particularly by married working women were significant factors in their personal and work-life balance as well as experience of depression and anxiety (Nidhi, et.al. (2021).

In terms of age, the same study reported that respondents aged 35-49 were struggling more than other age groups in terms of work-life balance which could be attributed to the fact that people of this age are more likely to have children and consequently were affected by the new living and working arrangements. Moreover, many younger workers reported that they feel isolated at work (Eurofound, 2020). The feeling of isolation and not being able to interact with co-workers may deprive one to develop relationships and receive feedback and support when needed. It is also interesting to note that the different work set-ups such as the work-from-home, skeletal workforce, four-day workweek, and shifting/flexible working hours provide the same degree of advantage to the respondents. This could be explained by the fact that all working arrangements give them flexibility in carrying out their duties as well as extra time to attend to their family and personal needs. On the contrary, the Eurofound (2020) study concluded that employees who worked exclusively from home were less likely to feel doing a useful job, more often reported high quantitative demands, and more often reported feeling isolated.

5. Comparison of the Perceptions of Organizational Support in Terms of Profile

Table 2
 Comparison of the Respondent's Perceptions of Organizational Support in Terms of Profile

Profile	Group	p-value	Remarks
Sex	Male	.661	Do not Reject Ho
	Female		
Civil Status	Single	.017	Reject Ho
	Married		
Family Members	3-5	.318	Do not Reject Ho
	6 or more		
Age	18-29yo	.480	Do not Reject Ho
	30-39yo		
	40-49yo		
Position	50yo & above	.790	Do not Reject Ho
	Clerical		
	Technical		
	Supervisory		
Work Set Up	Managerial	.124	Do not Reject Ho
	Work from Home		
	Skeletal Workforce		
	Four-day Workweek		
	Shifting/Flexible Working Hrs.		

**significant at 0.01; ns-not significant at 0.05 level. n-number of cases; M-Mean; SD-Standard Deviation; Group means ratings with common letter/s is/are not significantly different at .05 level. For t-test: df=198; For F-test: df between=3; df within=196; df total=199.

Table 2 reflects the comparison of the respondent's perceptions of organizational support in terms of profile. Organizational support includes not only safeguarding the health and safety of the workforce

and developing work plans, but also—and perhaps most importantly providing material resources, upholding open lines of communication, and consistently monitoring the needs and conditions of the workforce. These kinds of support are being received by the respondents at the same level regardless of their sociodemographic profiles except for civil status.

Employees who were single perceived more organizational support than those who were married. The difference in organizational support between those who are married and single can be attributed to the fact that married employees face more responsibilities in the family, need more time to attend to family needs, and probably require more resources than those who are single employees. This assertion is supported by a study by Noguchi (2012), which found that when resources in a more important function are low, parents may experience more conflict between their personal and professional lives because they believe they are accountable for the demands in the more important role.

6. Significant Relationship between Alternative Work Arrangement and Organizational Support

Table 3
Relationship between Alternative Work Arrangement and Organizational Support

Variables	Alternative Work Arrangement Organizational Support
r	.422**
R²	.195
p-value	.000
Strength of Relationship	Moderate Correlation
Remarks	Significant
Decision	Reject Ho

Correlation Coefficient: $\pm .80 - \pm 1.0$ High Correlation; $\pm .60 - \pm .79$ Moderately High Correlation; $\pm .40 - \pm .59$ Moderate Correlation; $\pm .20 - \pm .39$ Low Correlation; $\pm .01 - \pm .19$ Negligible Correlation
 **significant at 0.01 level, ns – not significant at 0.05 level.

Table 3 shows the relationship between the alternative work arrangement and organizational support. Regarding the main objective study, which is the correlation between organizational support and alternative work arrangement, the results revealed a significant positive moderate relationship between the two variables. This would mean that the more organizational support the employees receive, the higher they feel the alternative work arrangement is advantageous on their part. Thus, if the alternative work arrangement will continue to be implemented investment in IT infrastructure and digital skills development among public servants must be prioritized by public organizations. Additionally, support for remote work such as transparent and consistent communication, mechanisms for the provisions of physical, mental, emotional, and social support, and the work-life balance must also be institutionalized. Furthermore, present labor regulations should be examined to ensure that labor insurance provisions are extended to home workers.

Conclusions

The present study contributes to our understanding of the advantages of alternative work arrangements implemented in the local government units and their relation to its organizational support. It provides evidence of the advantages of working from a home setting, a four-day workweek set-up, a skeleton workforce, and other alternative work arrangements in which employees are allowed to work remotely, particularly during a pandemic. Though there was an abrupt change and disruption in their regular work-set up, the alternative work arrangement has brought additional benefits such as having more

time to meet family and personal needs, greater flexibility in their work schedule, and being more committed to their job. Attending both to the demands of work and family while working at home, on the other hand, leads to physical and emotional exhaustion as well as less time to relax and enjoy oneself. These experiences were not significantly different among the respondents regardless of their sociodemographic characteristics. The new alternative work arrangement employees received significant organizational support, especially in protecting their health and safety and implementing efficient job completion strategies. However, employees who are single experience a higher degree of assistance than those who are married. The study also shows how vital organizational support is to the benefits of the alternative work arrangement for the employees. Employees will therefore have a better experience with the alternative work arrangement if it is ensured that material resources, such as IT infrastructure along with the development of digital skills, are provided and that management maintains open communication and regular check-ins to see how employees are doing personally and professionally.

Recommendations

The alternative work arrangement has had a positive impact on the employees' work lives in general; however, the organization (local government units) must continue to help employees to avoid work exhaustion and manage work-life balance by providing employees the flexibility to work throughout the day or evening when it works best for them rather than a traditional 8:00 am to 5:00 pm schedule; allowing employees to take time off from replying to non-urgent emails or any form of electronic messages outside of work hours; reducing the length and frequency of meetings, particularly unproductive meeting; and advising employees to create separate personal and professional user accounts on their devices.

The organization should also consider married employees' specific needs since they experience a greater need for organizational support in carrying out their core tasks when working under various alternative work arrangements. The organization should support married employees particularly parents to ensure their well-being so and can enjoy the benefit of being a partner and parents and great employees by allowing them to work flexible hours from home or to re-arrange their shifts by using weekends (if applicable); introducing new programs such as virtual sessions on mental health, parenting, family and relationships, financial planning, etc.; and taking into account factors like not penalizing them for missing deadlines due to caregiving.

Finally, to maximize the benefits of alternative work arrangements as it is expected to continue due to the recurrence of any possible outbreak, the organization should maintain frequent, transparent, and consistent communication to avoid employees feeling disconnected from the organization, to keep them well inform about what is happening in their organization, and to allow them to voice their concerns; and to enable effective remote work, the organization should provide the employee's communication tool such as internet support with collaboration platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Suite, laptops or gadgets, and training on the use of this technology so that can continue to perform their task effectively and efficiently.

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