**Work-from-Home, In-Person Work, or Hybrid Arrangements? A Classroom Exercise Utilizing Students’ Own Experiences to Guide Conversations about the Complexity of Work Arrangements**

**Abstract**

The activity presented in this session allows students to grasp the vast complexities in determining work arrangement policies. Students draw on their own experiences from both traditional, in-person learning and online learning, and then are pushed to engage in perspective taking from a managerial viewpoint, which often brings to light new considerations. Finally, students are asked to create a policy for work arrangements for a fictitious organization. Through these discussions, it is revealed that many “real-life” managers have enacted policies that simply reflect their own preferences with little regard for individual- and organizational-level outcomes such as attitudes, turnover, and performance. At a more abstract level, this exercise demonstrates to students that preferences are important individual differences, which need to be attended to in order to maximize both individual and organizational performance.

**Keywords**

Work Arrangements, Personal Experience, Reflection, Perspective Taking, Discussion, In-Class Activity

**Introduction**

The concept of physical work arrangements (i.e., employees working in person, virtual, or a hybrid arrangement) in a post-pandemic world is of great interest to employees and managers alike. Since the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines, employers have been grappling with pressure to decide what work arrangements to put in place for their employees (Markman, 2021). Like many managerial decisions, it is one that is highly complex and requires an analysis of individual-level, managerial-level, and organizational-level variables. Little guidance exists for how to make these decisions and thus many organizational leaders are making workplace arrangement decisions based on their own personal preferences and/or outdated implicit theories. The purpose of this activity is to illustrate the complexities of this specific managerial decision. It does so by examining students’ own preferences based on their personal experiences with online learning during the pandemic and in-person learning pre- or post-pandemic. Within this discussion, students often recognize that others may have different preferences to themselves, and that there may be benefits to different work arrangements that they had not previously considered. Students are then pushed to consider these issues from a managerial and organizational perspective, which forces them to engage in perspective taking as there are different considerations for managers in charge of employees than their own personal considerations. Finally, students are asked how a CEO or other organizational leader should make a policy regarding work arrangements, prompting a rich discussion about how difficult and complex this decision is, and why relying on personal preferences alone as the decision criterion is not beneficial to employees and organizations alike.

**Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications**

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees transitioned from working in person to working at home. Employees quickly realized the many benefits to working from home primarily in the form of time and money savings, but employers were anxious to get employees back into the office. As the pandemic stretched on, employers realized they may struggle with getting employees back into the office full time (e.g., Cutter, 2021). There is tension between the employees, many of whom want to stay remote, and employers, who want employees back in person. This is likely due to there being more benefits for individuals to work from home, while there are more benefits for organizations for in-person work (Markman, 2021).

This is an area rife with opportunity for application to a management course, however, there is little guidance provided in textbooks or even the academic literature about what managers should do, and therefore it is difficult to concretely teach about (see Tarr, Bennett, Pervez, & Mullane, 2021). Thus, I created this activity to get students to think about their own experiences with remote versus in-person classes to consider the benefits and drawbacks of each of them. Contrary to my expectations, students recognized many of the benefits to in-person classes (e.g., it’s harder to slack off or not pay attention, their mental health is better due to getting out of the house, better networking and relationship building with other students and professors, etc.) Therefore, they were able to easily draw the comparisons to virtual and in-person work. (If students have trouble coming up with benefits to in-person work, instructors may want to provide some resources such as Markman, 2021).

As expected, students typically take the perspective of themselves as employees, rather than that of management and therefore seem to relate more with the benefits that relate directly to them. Thus, pushing students to consider the benefits and drawbacks from managements’ point of view allows them to perspective take from a manager’s view as well as reexamine their own assumptions and implicit theories (e.g., the idea that employees need to be watched or monitored or that desiring work-from-home is a sign of lack of commitment). At this point, students are engaging in higher levels of pedagogical thinking from Bloom’s Taxonomy such as Apply, Analyze, and Evaluate (Bloom, 1956).

In having students reflect on their own experiences, this activity fosters engagement and understanding (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Raelin & Coghlan, 2006) and helps students better understand the theoretical side to OB (McNeely, 2000). However, this activity goes beyond simple reflection to invoke application, analyzation, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956) by having students engage in perspective-taking and integrate different elements into an applicable work arrangement policy. The combination of these pedagogical elements makes for a rich activity that creates a lasting impression for students.

**Learning Objectives**

The primary learning objective for this activity is for students to grasp the immense complexity of the decision around workplace arrangements. There are several additional learning objectives. After participating in this activity, should will be able to:

* Identify their own preferences for work arrangements
* Assess the implications of different work arrangements at the individual, managerial, and organizational levels
* Summarize the benefits and drawbacks for different work arrangements and synthesize them to form work arrangement policies for different contexts

In Appendix B, I have included some sample student reflections from post-class discussion boards that illustrate what students have taken away from this exercise.

**Exercise Overview**

I begin this activity by drawing two columns on the whiteboard: one titled, “Virtual” and the other, “In-Person” and I ask students to consider the benefits to each one. Since most students enrolled in college currently have experienced both, this typically generates a lively (and at times humorous) discussion of their own experiences. In my instructor role during this part of the exercise, I generally just call on students and write their answers under the appropriate column. However, I sometimes challenge what they say in order to bring other perspectives to light; for example, if a student mentions that there are fewer distractions with in-person classes, I may ask, “But are there? Or are there just different types of distractions?” I also may use some of their comments as “fodder” for subsequent parts of the exercise. For instance, students often mention that they think some classes are very effective online, while others “should be” in person. I use comments such as this to discuss how there may be tasks that are more suitable for certain contexts, but will simply say, “Hm, perhaps something to keep in mind,” hinting at the fact that this may be a managerial implication.

At the conclusion of this part of the discussion, there is a robust list of benefits for both in-person and virtual learning. This is a powerful visual for students to see that one is not objectively better than the other, at least in a way that applies to every person in every situation. I then ask the students to raise their hands if they prefer virtual classes and then in-person classes; it tends to be split between the two (but there may be variance between classes). Many times, one or more students will then ask, “What about a mix of both?” prompting several students to agree. I then ask students to raise their hand if they would prefer some combination of virtual and in-person classes and find that most (between 50 and 75%) students raise their hands.

I then switch marker colors and add “Work” next to the “Virtual” and “In-Person” labels on the board and tell students that we’re now going to consider things from a manager’s perspective; that is, if they were a manager, what are the benefits of having their subordinates/direct reports be in-person or virtual? I list these benefits under the appropriate column in the different color marker. If the same benefit already exists from the prior discussion, I underline it in the new color market (e.g., “more time to spend on work resulting in increased productivity” may appear as both a benefit that they experienced themselves with virtual classes as well as a benefit they see managers may experience with their employees). Students often do not have trouble generating ideas, but it may be a little bit of a slower conversation than the previous one and it typically results in fewer listed benefits, but still enough to see that there are compelling reasons for both in-person and virtually work.

I then switch to a third color of marker and ask what benefits these different arrangements may provide to organizations. They may need some prompting at this point, such as, “What do you think offering a fully virtual work arrangement might do to recruiting?” or, “Do you think forcing employees to go back to in-person work might affect retention?” or, “What do you think all virtual work might do to collaboration and creativity?”

Once the board is complete with individual, managerial, and organizational-level benefits for each, I ask students to imagine they are the CEO of a company, and they need to decide what work arrangements they’re going to utilize in their company. At this point, some students are beginning to grasp the idea that this is a very complex decision and will give an answer along the lines of, “well it depends,” at which point, I push them to consider *on what* it depends. This leads to a rich discussion of how many factors (like the ones listed on the board) need to be considered when making this decision. I end the activity by asking how whether they think most CEOs consider all this information (pointing to the board full of considerations) when enacting a policy. The resulting “no ways” prompt a discussion about how many CEOs and other organizational decision makers have enacted policies based on their own personal preferences and how this negatively impacts individual and organizational productivity.

For a simplified outline of the activity, see Appendix A.

**Session Description**

The proposed time for this session is 60 minutes. I will spend the first five minutes giving a brief introduction to myself as well as share the impetus for this activity. We will then spend most of the session—approximately 40 minutes—engaging in the activity I described above in the “Exercise Overview” section. Finally, we will end with a debrief of the activity and hold a discussion of how to implement this into the classroom

The intent for this session is for attendees to experience the exercise from the perspective of a student, and therefore, I will begin by asking attendees to consider their own experiences as an instructor for both online and in-person learning. Although attendees (most being management scholars and/or instructors) are likely to grasp the complexity of managerial decision making around workplace arrangements prior to coming to this session, they may be exposed to additional perspectives from other attendees that they can integrate into their own utilization of this exercise in the classroom.

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| **Activity** | **Duration in Minutes** |
| Welcome and Introduction | 5 |
| Activity | 40 |
| Debrief & Discussion | 15 |
| **TOTAL** | **60** |

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**Appendix A**

Activity outline:

1. Write two columns on the board for (1) virtual and (2) in-person. Ask students to list the benefits they experienced for each type of learning/classes and write them in the appropriate column.
2. Switch marker colors. Write “work” next to each of the column titles in the new marker color. Ask students to list the benefits they see for each type of work. If a benefit for work is already listed from the discussion on classes, underline it in the new color.
   1. Take a vote by a raise of hands for how many students would prefer virtual work to in-person work. If not prompted by a student comment, follow this by asking students to raise their hand if they would prefer a hybrid arrangement.
3. Switch marker colors to a third color. Ask students what benefits they see for each work arrangement from a managerial or organizational viewpoint and note them in the appropriate column.
4. Tell students to take the perspective of a manager or other organizational leader and design a(n informal) policy on work arrangements for their organization.
   1. If they give the classic, “it depends” answer, push them to specify on what it depends.
5. Ask students to consider whether they think most organizational leaders consider all the points listed on the board (which should be an extensive list) when making these decisions.
   1. The rhetorical answer is no, at which point, ask why not, and discuss the vast complexity of this type of decision.

**Appendix B**

Below are selected student comments from post-class discussion boards reflecting on the activity described in this submission. For the discussion board, students are instructed to pick one thing from that day’s class that had an impact on them and will change their view going forward.

**Comment 1**: “*I enjoyed discussing the pros and cons of studying in our homes and how it affected our work/non-work boundaries. It was interesting to see how my classmates were describing their experiences online as on campus. I personally prefer a hybrid schedule, it gives me more freedom on what assignments to do first, set my own pace, and not feel the pressure of having to be on class data at a specific time. But I also believe that some classes should be in-person so that the class can be more fluent and easy to comprehend. Also, interaction with classmates in person is 100 times better than doing it behind a screen where nobody is paying attention. This will change my behavior in the future by selecting hybrid schedules focusing on the most productivity that I can get as possible.*”

**Comment 2**: “*The most interesting thing I found from class was the different perspectives of a work life balance. There were many benefits of working from home and the benefits of working in an office. Before going in to class I thought that working from home was a bad working environment compared to working in an office/building. However, looking at the benefits of working from home it was almost the same amount of benefits that we got from working in an office. Working from home can give someone more job opportunities, a sense of freedom and many other things. The benefits of working in an office is that you are able to focus more, have face to face interaction, etc. This will change my perspective on people's preference on their work environments. Depending on what the individual is going through such as taking care of their children or not being able to commute, working from home may be the individuals working environment preference. There are others that like to go to work and know that they are going to be around others to socialize and to mainly focus on strictly work to separate their lives at home and work. It really depends on the individual and their daily tasks to see which one fits better in their schedules and their working mental state*.”

**Comment 3**: “*I thought the discussion on managers and organizations deciding on how to approach returning to work post-pandemic was interesting.  Managers deciding whether to work in-person or online based on their preferences was something that makes sense but is not discussed as much as it should be.  In an ideal world, managers would base their decision based on their employees, maximizing productivity for both those who are integrators and segmentors.  In reality, many managers are making decisions based on their own preferences not accounting for everyone else along the work-nonwork spectrum.  The pros and cons of each that we discussed apply differently to different people.  For example, I work better and more productively in-person compared to at home.  Home is where I relax and rest from the day -- a job that would require me to work remotely would be less than ideal. With this in mind, as organizations continue to figure out the best work-nonwork balance and how it manifests itself, I will approach job searching differently.  As an integrator, a company with great benefits and an in-person position would be extremely ideal.  Additionally, as a management student, this adds to the list of things to consider when trying to increase productivity and quality of work as a manager.*”