

The Attitude of Government Employees to Remote Work After First Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kyrgyz Republic

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This research project aims to study the attitude of Kyrgyz civil servants towards remote work after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines whether government employees want to continue practicing remote work in the future and whether any factors may influence their decision. The survey aims to understand the attitude and experience of civil servants towards remote work, with an emphasis on identifying the motives for remote work, any problems that arise during remote work, and the impact of remote work on productivity. The results of this study can provide insight into the potential of remote work to improve the efficiency of government agencies and support the potential of government organizations in Kyrgyzstan. The majority of respondents are neutral about whether telecommuting is negatively related to perceived career prospects. However, most respondents who have had remote work experience believe that telecommuting is positively related to job performance. The study suggests that remote work could potentially hinder short- and long-term growth within an organization, and that employers should consider ways to promote collaboration and community among remote workers to mitigate any negative effects of isolation.

Keywords: remote work, teleworking, COVID-19, civil servants, attitude, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

The year 2019 marked a significant turning point for the world due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in many countries implementing stringent measures to curb the spread of the virus. These measures included the closure of educational institutions, entertainment centers, shops, cafes, and many offices and organizations. The Kyrgyzstan government also urged citizens to practice social distancing and self-isolation to prevent the virus's spread. These measures will have negative consequences on economic growth, both directly and indirectly (Abulibdeh, 2020). To somehow save companies from bankruptcy and people from unemployment, the management of organizations decided to work remotely; such a measure also affected the public sector, where remote work had not been practiced before.

On March 17, Kyrgyzstan completely closed the border and banned foreigners from entering. The government banned restaurants and cafes with more than 50 seats. The same day the first three cases of infection were reported

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On March 21, the government declared a state of emergency in the country and advised citizens not to leave their homes. Accordingly, all organizations, regardless of their form of ownership, were advised to switch to remote work.

From May 1, a gradual resumption of economic activity began throughout the country.

For Kyrgyzstan, remote work among state and municipal employees is an innovation; the public sector has encountered such a practice for the first time. In my work, I would like to find out: the attitude of government employees to remote work after forced practice during the pandemic? Do they want to practice remote work in the future?

I propose the following hypotheses:

Civil servants in higher positions have more significant responsibilities within the organization, and therefore tend to prioritize ensuring that everything runs smoothly. As a result, they may be less likely to engage in teleworking.

Civil servants who have worked in an office for a longer period of time may have a better understanding of their duties and may be able to perform their tasks with the same level of quality while working remotely. Therefore, they may be more inclined to participate in teleworking.

Previous Studies

For many developed countries, remote work is a common practice in the private sector. According to most authors, working remotely is simpler in private companies than in the public sector, as private enterprises prioritize team collaboration and cohesion. Telecommuting is one tool that may impact this relationship, and impact it differently in the public sector than in the private sector since public organizations typically have more formalized systems (Cooper & Kurland, 2002).

For over 40 years, telework (or telecommuting) has been of interest to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners (Groen, Triest, Coers, & Wtenweerde, 2018; Hunton & Strand, 2010; Nilles, 1975). The main criterion for the development of online work is the rapid development of technology and Internet speed. But first, we will write what is the meaning of telecommuting. Most of the authors are similar in their definitions; we will consider the most interesting ones below. Telecommuting is an alternative work arrangement in which employees perform tasks elsewhere that are normally done in a primary or central workplace, for at least some portion of their work schedule, using electronic media to interact with others inside and outside the organization (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Baruch, 2001; Feldman & Gainey, 1997).

Moreover, global companies are trying to switch to remote work due to saving resources and money. According to the Global Workplace Analytics for Research (Akbari & Hopkins, 2019), the company's telework strategy saves up to \$22,000 annually for every remote employee. Also, it stated that teleworking had increased 140% since 2005 (Fraij & Aburumman, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 on the work of civil servants can also be seen in the example of other countries such as Portugal. As regards working conditions, teleworking was established as the mandatory working modality for public employees whenever this was compatible with the performance of their duties, and regardless of the form of the employment relationship. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, in May 2020, 88% of the employees at Directorate General for Administration and Public Employment in Portugal worked from home full time (International Labour Office, 2020).

The authors find a positive link between, on the one hand, increased perceived job productivity and, on the other hand, the number of hours working remotely before the lockdown and the degree of supervisor's control, on data from 700 teleworkers in Germany, highlight an increase in the perceived productivity and commitment during the lockdown (Kunze, Hampel, & Zimmermann, 2020).

By using data from Japan collected in June 2020, it shows a decrease of about 60% to 70%, compared to working at the usual workplace (Morikawa, 2020).

Using US data collected monthly between May and October 2020, it shows that the home office experience has exceeded individuals' expectations in terms of productivity for 61% of teleworkers; 26% estimate that their productivity is the same and 13% that it is lower (Barrero et al., 2019).

Teleworking has been studied from many perspectives, including technological issues, organizational issues, environmental issues, and workforce issues (Siha & Monroe, 2006). In my opinion, remote work in the public sector will become a tool to strengthen the capacity of public authorities and increase the efficiency of their activities in the current difficult conditions. Therefore, I would like to explore the topic of the desire to work online for civil servants in my country Kyrgyzstan, in particular in the city of Bishkek.

Table 1

The Remote Work Concept

Modality	Use of technology	Location
Regular home-based remote work	Always or almost all the time	From home at least several times a month and in other locations less often than several times a month.
High mobile remote work	Always or almost all the time	At least several times a week in at least two locations other than the employer's premises or working daily in at least one other location.
Occasional remote work	Always or almost all the time	Less frequently and/or fewer locations than high T/ICTM (telework/ICT-mobile work).

Source: Eurofound and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Concepts and Measurements

To ensure the accuracy of my survey questions, I developed a concept and measurement and thoroughly reviewed them multiple times. The primary focus of the survey is to understand civil servants' practice and attitude towards remote work. Specifically, the survey aims to uncover their motivations for teleworking and their attitudes towards both online and offline work.

In addition to gathering information on employee attitudes, it is crucial to identify any problems that employees have encountered while working remotely. This will help employers address common difficulties and improve the remote work experience for their employees. Communication and collaboration are also essential components of remote work, and it's important to determine how employees can effectively work together while being physically distant. Some employees may be hesitant to work outside the office, fearing that it will limit their opportunities for promotion and organizational rewards. This makes it necessary to explore any obstacles faced by remote workers, including technical support, socialization, and teamwork. Generally, interpersonal networks in organizations benefit employees because they allow people to establish relationships and gain access to information that can advance their professional careers (Cooper & Kurland, 2002).

The third aspect of the survey concept is to understand whether remote work poses any challenges for employees in carrying out their projects or fulfilling their work plans. This will help evaluate the impact of

teleworking on the overall productivity of the organization. It's important to assess the effectiveness of organizational activities during remote work to identify areas that need improvement.

Additionally, the survey will explore civil servants' desire to continue working remotely and whether they would prefer online work if they were to switch jobs. This information will provide insights into employees' personal job satisfaction and their intention to change jobs. Understanding their preference for online or offline work today will also help employers better understand employee needs and preferences and make informed decisions about teleworking policies.

Sample Description

This section provides background information about civil servants and municipal employees in the city of Bishkek. Bishkek is the capital of Kyrgyzstan, a city of republican significance, and the administrative center of the Chui region. It's also the largest city in Kyrgyzstan, with a population of 1,088,900 people.

According to the State Personnel Service of the Kyrgyz Republic, there are a total of 15,901 civil servants in the country, and over half of them (8,312 people or 52.3%) work in Bishkek. To determine the sample size for the survey, an internet site was used with a confidence level of 90%, a margin of error of 5%, and a recommended minimum size of 263 respondents.

The majority of civil servants (20.1%) have work experience in the civil service from seven to 11 years. Out of the 8,312 employees holding administrative public office in Bishkek, 43.4% (3,607 people) are women. This information will help provide context for the survey results and give a better understanding of the population being surveyed.

Collection Methods

The final version of the survey consists of 18 questions and two sub-questions, with five demographic questions (Q1-Q5) designed to provide a complete understanding of the respondents and their characteristics. To evaluate the factors identified from the literature, a Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) was used for Questions Q8, Q9, and Q11-Q14. The remaining questions (Q15-Q18) have a selection of Yes, No, or Difficult to answer.

Initially, it was planned to use the Likert scale for the entire questionnaire to simplify the analysis of the answers. However, it became evident that for some questions, only three possible answers were necessary to address the questions posed at the beginning of the report.

Although the minimum recommended sample size for the survey was 263 respondents, only 163 responses were received. Therefore, the confidence level changed to -80%, while the margin of error remained constant at 5%. While a smaller sample size may reduce the accuracy of the survey results, the data still provide valuable insights into the attitudes and experiences of civil servants and municipal employees toward remote work.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the study was to investigate the reasons why civil servants choose to telework. The survey used in the study consisted of 18 questions along with two sub-questions, six of which were demographic questions. Categorical analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. The findings revealed that 55% of the participants were female and 45% were male. Furthermore, 90% of the respondents have worked remotely

for over a month. The majority of the respondents agreed with the statement that remote work for state and municipal employees can become a common practice.

The first hypothesis: Civil servants in higher positions have more significant responsibilities within the organization, and therefore tend to prioritize ensuring that everything runs smoothly. As a result, they may be less likely to engage in teleworking. This hypothesis was confirmed by analyzing Q4, which asked respondents to specify their positions in the state and municipal service. The respondents were divided into two groups: Group A, consisting of higher and main positions, and Group B, consisting of senior and junior administrative positions. The average response for Q8, which asked if they agreed to work remotely in state and municipal institutions at the moment, was higher for Group B than for Group A, indicating that Group B preferred remote work more.

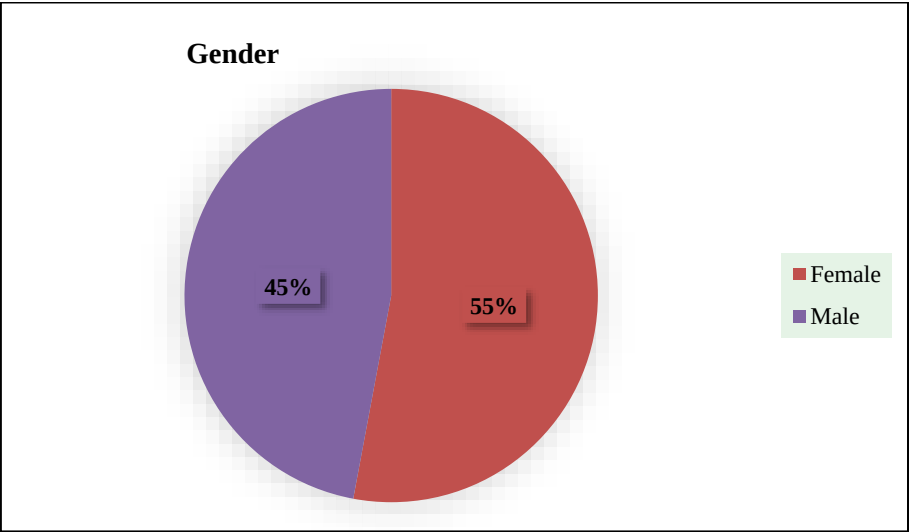


Figure 1. Demographic data.

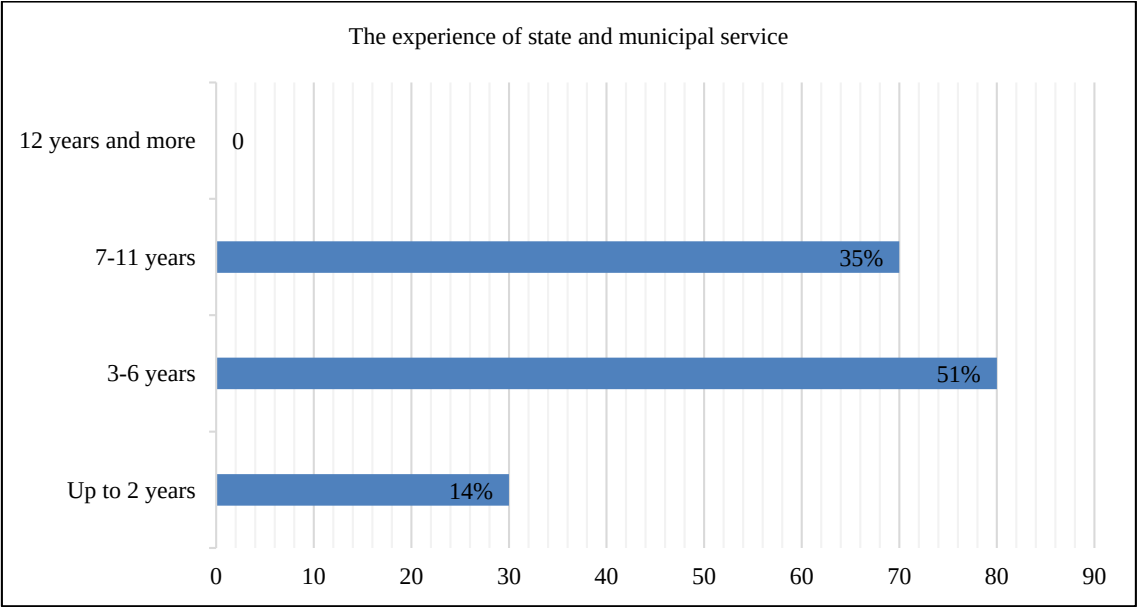


Figure 2. Work experience in years.

Table 2

Q8 Do You Agree to Work Remotely in State and Municipal Institutions at the Moment?

	Positions	Average answer (From = 1 strongly disagree to = 5 strongly agree)
1	Group A (higher, main)	3.3
2	Group B (senior and junior)	4.2

The researcher also hypothesized: Civil servants who have worked in an office for a longer period of time may have a better understanding of their duties and may be able to perform their tasks with the same level of quality while working remotely. As a result, the survey did not confirm this hypothesis. The participants were categorized into three groups according to their experience in state and municipal service, and the average response for Q8 were calculated for each group. Surprisingly, the third group, consisting of civil servants with 7-11 years of experience, showed a lower average response for Q8 than the first and second groups, suggesting that they were less inclined to choose teleworking.

Challenges Faced by Remote Workers

One of the main issues in this survey was the question of the difficulties faced by employees while working online. To clarify the circumstances, I turned to the Q10 (Have you encountered technical or any other difficulties in remote work?), where the answer was binary (yes or no).

79% of respondents had one or more difficulties; 21% answered “No”.

The next question Q10a was asked for clarifying which kind of difficulties the respondents faced. If the respondents answered Q10 yes, then in Q10a they could choose with the provided answers or write their answer in the questionnaire. The options provided are as follows:

Some common obstacles faced by remote workers are: unreliable internet connectivity, lack of access to a personal computer, inadequate or uncomfortable workspace at home.

In Q11 “Do you agree with the statement that the intensity of remote work mitigates the negative impact on the relationship between colleagues?”, an average answer is 3.5 (Likert scale) which means respondents preferred more agree than disagree. Next, it is interesting to find out the attitudes of women and men to this issue. Female’s average answer is 3.2 and they chose a more neutral position; however, male’s average answer is 3.8, assuming that males maintain good relationships far from colleagues.

The inquiry into which factors will no longer be significant when transitioning to remote work has prompted an examination of collaborative work. The question is as follows: “Do you agree with the statement that teamwork is important in remote work?” The majority of respondents agreed with this statement.

Organizational Performance

At the individual level, it may seem how respondents think about career prospects. After all, you are constantly away from the office and you may not always be noticed. To find out the opinion of people, I asked the following question: Do you agree with the statement that telecommuting is negatively related to perceived career prospects? The average response was 3.52 (Likert scale), which can be considered a neutral response. I dare to assume that since remote work is an innovation, you will not get an unambiguous answer. Most likely, after only many years of practice, you can finally make sure of any negative and positive consequences in the promotion of a career.

In Q12 “Do you agree with the statement that telecommuting is positively related to job performance?”, to analyze this question, I left only those who answered “Yes” in Q7 (Have you had more than one month of remote

work experience in state and municipal institutions?); it will be stimulating to know the opinion of those who already have experience. In total for this Q7, I have 163 respondents. And their answers are arranged as follows: strongly disagree—0, disagree—15%, neither agree nor disagree—29%, agree—49%, strongly agree—7%. The majority of respondents are inclined that telecommuting is positively related to their job performance.

As part of my research, I was curious about how remote work affected project implementation within organizations and whether any difficulties or problems arose. Specifically, I asked Question 13: “Do you think there were interruptions in work in your organization, stopping projects due to remote work?” This question had 140 respondents, and the data are presented in a chart where 37% answered “Yes”, 35% answered “No”, and 29% found it difficult to answer.

Personal Job Satisfaction and Intention to Change Jobs

In the final set of questions, my focus was on exploring the present outlook of civil servants towards teleworking. Specifically, I aimed to understand their level of preparedness for online work and whether they have a preference for remote working. In Q16 “If you were offered to work permanently on a remote basis at your current job, would you accept such an offer?”, the analysis of this question is the opinion of those who have already experienced and all respondents in general.

Table 3

Q16 If You Were Offered to Work Remotely Permanently at Your Current Job, Would You Accept Such an Offer?

Number of respondents	163 (all respondents)	132 (had experience)	31 (did not have experience)
Yes	58%	60%	51%
No	25%	22%	23%
Difficult to answer	17%	18%	26%

Looking at the table, we can already assume that those who have already had the experience of remote work are more supportive of it.

My last question in the survey is the following Q17 “When choosing your next job, will you give preference to remote work?” The respondents had the options “Yes”, “No”, “Difficult to answer”. If we look at the Q16 where respondents are willing to work remotely in the current job, then the results of the Q17 are not expected: Yes—36%, No—43%, Difficult to answer—21%.

In addition to Q17a, there was an optional comment to answer Q17 and there some respondents answered why they prefer online work: “If I would be asked the question during the job interview, I would opt for this option as it would allow me to spend time with my family”, “I value the opportunity to be with my family, so I would prefer remote work because I can manage time in my own way”.

Limitations and Future Research

Further research is needed to fully understand the drawbacks of remote work and how employers can address them in order to attract and retain employees who prefer this type of work arrangement. The limitations of this particular article should also be taken into account, as it does not explore the challenges that organizations may face when implementing remote work policies. For instance, some respondents in the survey reported interruptions and project delays as a result of remote work. It is important to consider these difficulties, as civil servants ultimately work for the benefit of the state and its citizens.

As remote work becomes more common in the future, it will be important to study how it affects employee isolation and professional development. It is possible that working remotely could hinder short- and long-term growth within an organization, but more research is needed to fully understand these potential consequences. Employers should also consider ways to promote collaboration and community among remote workers in order to mitigate any negative effects of isolation.

Conclusion

The first hypothesis: Civil servants in higher positions have more significant responsibilities within the organization and therefore tend to prioritize ensuring that everything goes smoothly. As a result, they may be less likely to do remote work. This hypothesis was confirmed in my opinion because the managerial abilities of high positions are essential regardless of the type of work. This hypothesis was confirmed. The second hypothesis: Civil servants who have worked in the office for a longer period of time can better understand their duties and are able to perform their tasks with the same level of quality, working remotely, has not been confirmed. Based on these hypotheses, it can be assumed that before the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was not a common practice in the Kyrgyz Republic. Especially for people who have worked most of the time in the office, going to remote work might seem more difficult. However, the pandemic has led to a wider introduction of remote work not only in private enterprises, but also in the public sector. This experience gained during the pandemic can be used for future remote work opportunities. As the world continues to evolve in technology, teleworking may become common practice in the long run. However, this will require the development and implementation of policies, regulations, and labor legislation that support remote work, as well as the digitalization of the public sector.

As for the recommendations, it is important to solve the problem of weak Internet access in certain areas in order to facilitate the practice of remote work. Pilot projects in individual organizations can also be implemented to analyze the effectiveness and profitability of remote work for the state.

In general, this study can serve as a basis for future research on remote work in the Kyrgyz Republic.

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