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Telecommuting and organizational performance in the phase of Covid-19 Pandemic in South East Region



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This work examined telecommuting and organizational performance in the phase of the COVID 19 pandemic in the South East region of Nigeria. The dynamic nature of the environment in which organizations operate and the urgency required for responding to customers' needs in the phase of the COVID 19 pandemic made this investigation necessary. The broad objective of this study is to examine telecommuting and organizational performance in the phase of Covid-19 pandemic. To achieve the objective, a survey research design was adopted. The population of the study was 1,195 and the Taro Yamane formula was used to derive the study sample size of 300. Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient was used in the testing of hypotheses. The results revealed that; there is a positive but insignificant correlation between working at home and an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time; there is a significant correlation between working at agreed location and resolution of customers complaints; working on transit has a weak but positive association with speedy service delivery. Based on these findings, the researchers concluded that telecommuting has a minimum impact on the organizational performance in the phase of the COVID 19 pandemic. The researchers, therefore, recommended, among others, that organizations need to encourage the work practice that allows employees to work at the agreed location since it has been found to have a significant and positive correlation with the resolution of customers' complaints. **Keywords:** telecommuting, working at home, working on transit, organizational performance, covid-

19 pandemic.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, a city in China's in December 2019 (Stewart, Connelly & Robinson, 2020; BMJ Best Practice, 2020). The virus has now affected over 200 countries across the globe and now characterized as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020a). On 15th September 2020, there were 29,611,395 laboratory-confirmed cases of (Covid-19) infection globally, with 935,767 reported deaths (WHO, 2020b). The index cases and deaths outside of China overtook those within the country on 15th September 2020 (WHO, 2020b). According to medical reports, Covid-19 symptoms include fever, cough, difficulty breathing, fatigue, body aches, headache, new loss of taste, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting and diarrhea (CDC, 2020; Muhammad, Suliman, Abeer, Nadia & Rabeea, 2020). Different countries across the globes are implementing policies like self- quarantine, self - isolation, and social distancing to check the ugly situation. These policies have led to the closure of schools, worship centers, markets, social gatherings, organizations, and so on. This has brought about many upheavals in our lives, economy, and society at large. There are lots of things to grapple with the Covid-19 experience, the realities: the problem of quarantine, the psychology of social distancing, decline in the performance of organizations, downsizing, closure of some organization, and emotional disruptions.

Telecommuting, however, is a work practice that allows employees to perform their assign tasks from any location other than the traditional office space from some portion of their official working hours. The location of work may be the employees' home, or other location outside the traditional office space (example, while on the road or from client site). Keri and Carol (2004) argued that telecommuting, otherwise known as 'teleworking' is concerned with "work arrangement with employers that allow them to perform their task at home or other convenient locations instead of coming into the formal workplace". Furthermore, telecommuting can be seen as a work practice in which employees swap most of their official working hours to work from home or agreed location performing work tasks, and communicating with the office via technological means (Allen, Golden, and Shockley, 2015). The term "telecommuting" was first coined by Jack Nilles in 1972. He was known as the father of telecommuting (Gordon, 2017). At that time, Nilles was working remotely on a complex National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) communication system located in Washington D.C. USA (Wright, 2004). When people ask him what he was doing? He told them he was telecommuting (Gordon, 2017). Thereafter, in 1979, Frank Schiff introduced the term "flexplace" and wrote a well-read article for the Washington Post called "Working From Home Can Save Gasoline" (Gordon, 2017). Till today, this concept is still important, and organizations in developing economies are keying in especially in the phase of Covid-19 Pandemic where some organizations stop operations and others reduced the number of staff that works per day in the traditional office space in other to reap the benefit thereof and also contain the spread of Covid-19 and its safety protocol.

Statement of the problem

In recent time, intensive research efforts has focus on telecommuting, due to rapid changes in the business environment characterized by such phenomena as the Covid-19 pandemic, globalization, and changing customers' demand. Efforts have focused on how to adjust work schedules, timelines, and physical locations to cope with and reap the full benefits of evolving global trends and discoveries. But the concept of telecommuting which allows employees to perform assign tasks/work off-site from some portion or all of their official

working hours help organizations in a meeting of customers needs, save clients the stress of going to the traditional office spaces, increase the number of clients attended to over some time, bring services to the doorsteps of clients, help in customer complaint resolution and speedy service delivery in the phase of Covid-19 pandemic. But most managers do not take this work practice seriously; as a result, they do not consider employee personal motivation, technology, and environment as it affects the performance of telecommuters. When people who are not self-starters and need external disciple embark on telecommuting, the purpose is defeated because they will see it as an opportunity to pursue their personal goals at the expense of the organization.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of this study is to examine telecommuting and organizational performance in the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. The specific objectives are as follows:

- i. To determine whether working at home correlates with an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time.
- ii. To ascertain whether working at the agreed location has any correlation with the resolution of customers' complaints.
- iii. To examine whether working on transits has any association with speedy service delivery.

Research Hypotheses

In line with the specific objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated.

HO₁: There is no significant correlation between working at home and an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time.

 HO_2 : Working at the agreed location has no significant correlation with the resolution of customers' complaints.

HO₃: There is no significant correlation between working on transit and speedy service delivery.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Organizations struggle to survive in today's dynamic and competitive environment, besides the ability to be flexible, quick, and innovative also knowledge on how to use working time effectively especially in the phase of Covid-19 Pandemic. In recent times the flexible work arrangements, i.e telecommuting, seem to be one option on how to fulfill these requirements. This new strain in work organization enables employers not only to organize human resources in line with the customers' needs but also enhances the performance of employees through improved motivation and productivity (Fisher, 2011). Elizabeth (2002) asserts that different factors affect the sequence of telecommuting within organizations. Telecommuting programme can be full-time or part-time, formal or informal, employee or organizationinitiated. Employees who telecommute full-time perform their entire assign task in other locations than their employers' office with little to no face-to-face interaction with managers and colleagues. Employees who telecommute part-time perform some of their task off-site and interact with managers and colleagues on a rare but scheduled basis. The frequency at which telecommuting is supported differs from one organization to another. Elizabeth (2002) asserts that a formal telecommuting programme is an agreement between the worker and management that outlines the specifications of telecommuters. This agreement include

information such as the specific days that the employee will work away from the office, hours the employee will be available to clients/colleagues, the frequency with which an employee will reply voicemails/e-mails, and deadlines for the completion of work tasks while informal telecommuting programme are not supported by agreement and may be design to include a day scheduled for telecommuters per week, month, etc. or allowing the employees to work at home when the need arises.

Elizabeth further posits that employee-initiated telecommuting stems from the employees' desire to reduce commuting time, the disturbance encountered in the traditional office space and quest to effectively strike a balance between work and family life. Organization- initiated telecommuting arrangements are geared towards reducing costs (facility cost or costs associated with lost productive employee time due to difficult commutes) or retaining highly talented people who would not be able to work in the organizations traditional office space. Tulejova (2010) emphasized that not every employee can work off-site, that working off-site requires motivation. For employees, who are not self-starters and need external discipline, a normal work arrangement is more appropriate. Also, newly recruited employees benefit greatly from working in a team or with a leading person. Some workers also feel social exclusion, when they work at home. Many employees have no suitable environment for telecommuting. The most common problems are small apartments, noisy children, or neighbors. Under such circumstances, the most motivated employee could have problems focusing on work tasks. Furthermore, the application of telecommuting requires changes in management systems and cultures, thus the more organizations adopt a culture that is flexible the best it helps them to stand the test of time in a dynamic environment like ours. Managers should be able to lead and manage at a distance and they also should have faith in their staff commitment. However, not every task is best performed in a distributed and self-managing environment. There are many tasks, which require close interaction of the working team and such tasks cannot be fulfilled in a home environment, because they require special equipments that is why detailed analysis of each activity should precede the application of telecommuting.

Theoretical Framework

This section provides an overview of two theoretical perspectives suggested by the literature concerning telecommuting, which could explain the study. The two theoretical perspectives are drawn from adaptive structural theory and socio-technical system theory to support the theoretical framework for this study and will be discussed in turn.

Adaptive Structuration Theory

Adaptive structuration theory (AST) was propounded by Gidden in 1984, and the theory focuses on the practices that occur within social systems. According to Scott, Quinn, Timmerman, and Garrett (1998), Adaptive structuration theory narrows its focus to structure associated with technology. AST views the interactions between technologies, social structures, and human activities. In the view of Torraco (2005), AST opine that structures (general rules and resources proposed by the technology) can vary from structuration (how people use the rules and resources). There is interplay between the conscious use of technology and the way that people use technology. Telecommuting provides a social structure that enables and impedes certain interactions (Bartol, Tesluk, and Langa, 2009). For example, in organizational settings, the standard may be to interact with others on face-to-face basis. To achieve interpersonal conversation in telecommuting, other forms of interaction need to be used. AST imply that when technologies are used over time, the rules

and resources for social interactions will change (Desanctis and Poole, 1994). Torraco (2005) asserts that telecommuting may change traditional work practices, such as changing from primarily face-to-face communication to electronic communication.

Socio-technical System Theory

Socio-technical system (STS) theory which was propounded by Trist and Bainforth in (1951), explains the interaction between social and technological factors. STS evaluates the relationships between people, technology, and the traditional office space, to design work in a way that improve job satisfaction and increases productivity (Torraco, 2005). Trist and Bainforth (1951) opine that STS was originally developed to tell the paradox of improved technology but decreased productivity, the theory was also applied to the design of telework. One of the principles of STS is the minimal critical specification. Telecommuting provides commuters with the right to decide when and who to perform assign their tasks (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). Similarly, commuters have the obligation to use the tools at their disposal and resources to carry out their assign task. Increase in task for telecommuters means increases in their power to discharge their duty. Morganson, Major, Oborn, Verive, and Heelan (2010) support the idea that telecommuting is a privilege and in some organizations, considered a promotion.

Empirical Review

Angel, Manuela, Maria and Pilar (2008) researched on telework adoption, change management, and firm performance in Spain. The objective of their study was to analyze the contribution of human resource (HR) commitment practice to firm performance through the adoption of telecommuting practices. The study adopted a survey of 156 firms in Spain using structural equation modeling. The research finding indicated that the extent of employees' access to human resource commitment practices and human resource social benefits is positively related to the intensity of telecommuting adoption and firm performance is positively associated with the intensity of telecommuting adoption, functional flexibility. The study recommended that HR commitment practices are indirectly related to telecommuting.

Gibson and Gibbs (2006) examined telecommuting and organizational survival in the US. The study sought to assess the effects that working outside the office has on productivity which directly affects a company's bottom line. This study explores these controversies using an experimental approach since prior research is largely cross-sectional. Creative and dull individual tasks were used to mimic two extreme work climates. The study population was 50 quoted companies in the US and Anova statistical technique was used in the testing of the hypotheses. The results indicated that working outside the office has positive implications on the creative tasks but negative implications on the dull tasks. The study recommends that different task determines the nature of autonomy to be given to the workers to telecommute.

Mungania, Waiganjo, and Kihoro (2016) carried out a study on the influence of flexible work arrangement on organizational performance in the banking industry in Kenya. The objective of the study was to determine the influence of flexible work arrangements on organizational performance in the banking industry in Kenya. A cross sectional survey was adopted for the study. The population consisted of 44 banks registered by the CBN of Kenya. Questionnaire that consists of structured and unstructured questions were used to elicit information from respondents. Multiple regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses and the

founding revealed that's workplace flexibility initiatives are critical component of a resultsdriven workplace, flexible work arrangements helps organization to meet their business objectives. The study concluded that consideration of flexible work arrangement aspects that pertains to employees can greatly influence organizational performance in banks in Kenya. Child care issues, dependent care, and employees having more time with the family had a positive and significant linear relationship on the measures of organizational performance which were customer satisfaction, target standards, employee satisfaction.

Onvemaechi, Uruakpa, and Uche (2018) researched on impact of telecommuting on employees' performance in telecommunication outfit in Owerri, Imo State. The changing nature of the environment our organizations operate and the varying need of customers made this study necessary. The study objectives were; to find out if an arrangement that enables the employee to work at home has a positive relationship with a better quality of work and to ascertain whether an arrangement that allows the employee to work at an agreed location has a significant relationship with speedy service delivery. A research survey design was adopted for the study. The spearman rank correlation coefficient was used in testing of the hypotheses. The results indicated that the arrangement that enables the employee to work at home has a weak and positive relationship with a better quality of work. It was also revealed that the arrangement that enables employees to work at the agreed location has a significant relationship with speedy service delivery. The study concluded that telecommuting has an impact on workers performance. It was recommended among others that managers of telecommunication out-fits should continue with the arrangement that enables employees to work at the agreed location since it was found to have a significant relationship with speedy service delivery.

Odu (2018) examined the effect of the teleworking system on employees' performance in Nigerian oil and gas upstream sector. The study objectives were; to determine the effect of utilization of information technology on employee performance, ascertain the impacts of smartphone usage on employee performance, and to find out the effect of flexible work arrangement on employees' performance. A sample of 278 staff was drawn from four selected oil and gas companies with operational headquarters in Lagos State using simple random sampling technique. The study employed cross-sectional survey research design while correlation, and regression analysis were used. Odu's finding revealed that use of information technology (β =.364, P<.01), use of Smartphone (β =.329, P<.01), and flexible work arrangement (β =.205, P<.01) have a significantly positive impact on employees' performance. The study concludes that flexible work arrangement gives employees more freedom and discretion to decide where and when they work and this has created a new work pattern to better manage traffic as well as commuting time. One of their recommendations was that organisations should provide workers with the fit for purpose furniture, equipment, computer, printer and scanner, telephone, proper internet connectivity, and be trained on how to use them to enhance their performance.

Miebaka, Chidiebere, and Ikechukwu (2018) examined the relationship between Telecommuting and Organizational Performance of Mobile (GSM) telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Telecommuting was conceptualized as the independent variable while profitability, timeliness, and efficiency were used as measures of the dependent variable. A cross sectional survey was adopted for the study. Questionnaire was used to elicit information for the study and the staff strength of 134 employees of 4 Mobile (GSM) telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt was used for the survey. Taro Yamane formula was used to derived (100) as sample size for the study. The research instrument was validated by experts while the reliability of the instrument was achieved by the use of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient with all the items scoring above 0.70. The hypotheses were tested using Spearman's Rank Correlation coefficient. The study findings revealed a positive and significant relationship between telecommuting and organizational performance of Mobile (GSM) telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt. The study recommends among others that mobile (GSM) telecommunication companies should provide more platforms that would encourage and motivate employees to perform assign task from environments that are convenient for them as this has a way of reducing the cost of hiring office space.

METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire was used to elicited information from employees' of selected deposit money banks and telecommunication outfit in South East, Nigeria. The researcher selected three deposit money banks and telecommunication outfits in each of the states that made up southeast Nigeria, in doing that the researcher considered the biggest banks in the State capitals expect Abia and Anambra State where the researcher focus on deposit money banks in Aba and Onitsha metropolis as is regarded as the business center of the respective States. The population of the study was one thousand one hundred and ninety-five (1195) and the Taro Yamane formula was used to derive the sample size, which is three hundred (300). The number of questionnaire administered to each stratum was determine using Bowley's formula. The instrument, made up of twenty-five (25) items was subjected to a reliability test using the Cronbach's alpha and the result is as shown below:

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's	N of Items	
Alpha		
.879	25	

Spearman rank correlation coefficient was used to analyse the hypotheses with the aid of SPSS (statistical package for social sciences) version 20.0.

Analysis and Results

A total of three hundred copies of the questionnaire were administered but only two hundred and seventy-five copies were returned. This represents a seventy-five percent response rate. The mean weighting of responses gathered from the questionnaire was computed and interpreted from the data and are presented in tables.

Frequency	Percentage	Mean	
17	6.2	3.20	
74	26.9		
35	12.7		
135	49.1		
14	5.1		
	17 74 35 135	17 6.2 74 26.9 35 12.7 135 49.1	17 6.2 3.20 74 26.9 35 12.7 135 49.1

Table 1. Responses on the extent working at home correlates with increase in the number of customers attended to over a period of time

Total	275	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2020.

As seen in table 1, the entire 275 valid respondents responded to the question. This depicts a 100% response rate. On the response of the respondents, 6.2%, 26.9%, 12.7%, 49.1%, and 5.1% of the respondent ticked to a very low extent, low extent, undecided, high extent and very high extent respectively that working at home correlate with an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time. This showed that most of the respondents accepted that working at home correlate with an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time. To confirm this, the mean response of the respondents of 3.20 was above the 3.00 cut-off mean for acceptance of a mean in a five-point Likert scale method of analysis. The study, therefore, accepted the mean and submits to a high extent that working at home correlates with an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time.

Options	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	
Strongly disagree	6	2.2	4.00	
Disagree	20	7.3		
Undecided	12	4.4		
Agree	167	60.7		
Strongly agree	70	25.5		
Total	275	100.0		

 Table 2. Responses on how working at agreed location correlate with the resolution of customers' complaints

Source: Field Survey, 2020.

The result on the table 2 showed that 2.2% and 7.3% of the respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively that working at agreed location correlates with the resolution of customers' complaints while 4.4% of the respondents were undecided on whether working at agreed location correlates with the resolution of customers' complaints. On the other hand, 60.7% and 25.5% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that working at agreed location correlates with the resolution of customers' complaints. This showed that most of the respondents accepted that working at an agreed location correlates with the resolution of customers' complaints. To buttress this, the mean score of 4.00 was higher than the cut-off mean of 3 depicting that the mean should be accepted. Based on this, the study asserts that working at an agreed location correlates with the resolution of customers' complaints.

Table 3. Responses on the extent working on transit associate with speedy service delivery

Options	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	
Very low extent	11	2.9	3.58	

Low extent	37	13.5
Undecided	42	15.3
High extent	159	57.8
Very high extent	26	9.5
Total	275	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2020.

From table 3, 2.9% and 13.5% of the respondents ticked to a very low extent and low extent respectively that working on transits associate with speedy service delivery. On the other hand, 57.8% and 9.5% of the respondents ticked to a high extent and a very high extent that working on transits associate with speedy service delivery. However, 15.3% of the respondents ticked undecided. The result of the above analysis showed that most of the respondents accepted that working on transits associates with speedy service delivery. To confirm the above result, the mean score of 3.58 was above the minimum mean for acceptance of 3 signifying that the mean should be accepted. Based on the result, the study asserts that working on transits associates with speedy service delivery.

Table 4. Spearman's rho correlation result on whether working at home has significant correlation with increase in the number of customers attended to over a period of time.

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient	Probability value	Ν
0.06	0.34	275

Source: Survey, 2020.

The result in table 4, showed Spearman's rho correlation result on whether working at home has a significant correlation with an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time. From the result, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of 0.06 showed that the correlation between working at home and an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time was minimal. This means that working at home has no significant correlation with the number of customers attended to over some time. On the other hand, the probability value of 0.34 was higher than the maximum probability value for significance 0.05 depicting that the improvement was not significant. Based on this, the study accepted the null hypothesis and concludes that working at home has a positive but insignificant correlation with an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time. This buttresses the point that there are other variables capable of improving the number of customers attended to over some time than working at home in the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 5. Spearman's rho correlation result on whether working at agreed location has significant correlation with the resolution of customers' complaints.

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient	Probability value	Ν
0.43	0.00	275

Source: Survey, 2020.

Information on table 5 deals with Spearman's rho correlation result on whether working at an agreed location has a significant correlation with the resolution of customers' complaints. From the result, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of 0.43 was recorded which indicates that a moderate and positive correlation exists between working at agreed location and

resolution of customers' complaints. On the significance of the relationship, the probability value of 0.00 was less than the maximum probability value for significance of 0.05. This depicts that the correlation between working at agreed location and resolution of customers' complaints was significant. Thus, this result is good as it helps organizations to reduce the inflows of clients into the traditional office space while keeping to the Covid-19 pandemic safety protocol and at the same time meets the need of their client. Based on this, the study rejected the null hypothesis, accepted the alternative, and concludes that working at an agreed location has a significant correlation with the resolution of customers' complaints. This means that as more employees' are allowed to work at an agreed location the higher they resolve and meet the need of customers' in the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 6. Spearman's rho correlation result on whether working on transit has significant correlation with speedy service delivery.

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient	Probability value	Ν
0.05	0.46	275

Source: Survey, 2020.

Table 6, showcased the Spearman's rho correlation result on whether working on transit has a significant correlation with speedy service delivery. From the result, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was 0.05. This shows a very weak correlation and it implies that working on transit has a very weak correlation with speedy service delivery however the relationship was positive. In the same way, the probability value (p-value) of 0.46 was higher than the 0.05 maximum probability value for significance. This depicts that the correlation was not significant. Therefore, the study accepted the null hypothesis and concludes that working on transit has a positive but insignificant correlation with speedy service delivery. This result was expected as there a lot of factors capable of hindering speedy service delivery while on transit such as poor network, lack of personal motivation by the employee, tiredness, and so on.

DISCUSSION OF FINDING

From the analysis of the first hypothesis, it was established that there is a weak but positive correlation between working at home and an increase in the number of customers attended to over some time. This correlates with the finding of Angel, Mannela, Maria, and Pilar (2008) which revealed that the extent of employees' access to HR commitment practices and social benefits is positively related to the intensity of telecommuting adaption and firm performance is positively related to the enthusiasm of telecommuting admission. Furthermore, this finding is also in agreement with the outcome of the study carried out by Gibson and Gibbs (2006) which states that working outside the office has positive implications on productivity of creative tasks. The finding of this study is also in agreement with the outcome of the research carried out by Odu (2018) which show that flexible work arrangement has positive significant impact on employees' performance.

Analysis of second hypothesis revealed that there is a moderate and positive correlation between working at the agreed location and resolution of customers' complaints. The result of this study is in line with the finding of the study carried out by Mungania, waiganjo and kihoro (2016) which states that flexible work arrangement has a positive and significant linear relationship on the measures of organizational performance which was customer satisfaction. The result of the third hypothesis revealed that working on transit has a weak but positive association with speedy service delivery. This finding does not correlate with the outcome of the study carried out by Miebaka, Chidie, and Ikechukwu in (2018) which revealed a positive and significant relationship between telecommuting and employee timelines in telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt. Furthermore, the finding of this study also does not fully agree with the outcome of a study carried out by Onyemaechi, Uruakpa, and Uche in (2018) which revealed that the arrangement that allows employees' to work at agreed location/transit has a significant relationship with speedy service delivery.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of the study on telecommuting and organizational performance in the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in the South East Region, the researchers concluded that the work practice (telecommuting) has minimum impact on performance of the selected deposit money banks and telecommunication outfit in the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Organizations that want to increase the number of customers to attended to in the phase of Covid-19 pandemic need to consider other options than working at home as the present study has revealed that it cannot improve the number of customers attended to over some time.
- 2) Management of organizations needs to encourage the work practice that allows employees to work at the agreed location since it has been found to have significant and positive correction with the resolution of customers' complaints in the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, they should also ensure there is a mechanism on the ground to regulate the activities of the telecommuters.
- 3) Managers need to encourage the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) to enhance network coverage in the location of their organization and rural areas to ensure that employees' have access to internet connectivity while on the road especially in the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic where some organizations have to reduce the number of staff that works per day and also the number of clients to be attended to per time.

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