Future Effects of the Corona-virus Pandemic on the Work Environment and the Workforce

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Abstract
Corona-virus has hit workplaces hard. The pandemic has resulted in the closure of several businesses and loss of employment. Born out of necessity, workplaces have experienced shifts in how businesses are conducted, which have led to the elimination of traditional work practices. The work-from-home mandate and social distancing order has led to increased need for remote working. The paper uses a survey based on Knowledge Networks online research panel where responses from fifteen managers and thirty employees were used to inform the study. Using measures of central tendencies to analyze the data, the study reveals that businesses will experience significant changes in how businesses will operate in the future. Results highlight that companies will incorporate more remote working measures and increase online communications, automation, and IT training. The resultant effect will involve a reduction in work travel. Work shifts also show the potential of integrating gender equality in the future. There is urgent need to analyze the geographical, social, and economic factors that might affect the changing dynamics associated with the corona-virus pandemic in work environments.

Keywords: Corona-virus, social distancing, remote working, Workplace, work environment.

Introduction
In approximately four months, the corona-virus epidemic has upended the daily lives of individuals throughout the world. The effects of transcend health impacts on the work environment. In most nations, the virus's economic impact has resulted in new categorizations of workers into two groups, including essential and non-essential workers. Other effects involve an increase in unemployment as several businesses closed following the impact of the corona-virus pandemic (Zouari, 2020). The work environment was also affected where more companies requested their employees to work from home. In this setting, employees must ensure they submit their work within the provided deadlines. In effect, several questions arise as to whether the flexibility of work environments brought about by the Corona-virus pandemic will remain even after the epidemic is over. From this perspective, the study evaluates whether the corona-virus pandemic's effects on the workforce and work environments.

The year 2020 was marked by the spread of the Corona-virus, which affected millions of individuals worldwide. The Corona-virus pandemic is a global health crisis whose impacts can be compared to World War Two (Nicola et al., 2020). Studies reveal that the virus started in China when the country alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) about unusual pneumonia cases in Wuhan during the late December holidays (Nicola et al., 2020). It is believed that the Corona-virus originated from the seafood market where game meat is sold illegally. Chinese researchers revealed that the virus could have been spread from infected Pangolin, which are highly prized in China. Corona-viruses involve a group of Ribonucleic acid (RNA) viruses that result in respiratory tract infections in birds and mammals. There are several viruses such as the common cold, which is less lethal and several other varieties such as Corona-virus, and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) that are more lethal among several others. The virus circulates among animals, and some of the illnesses can be transmitted between humans and animals. Corona-virus is the seventh known Corona-virus that affects human beings. Patients exhibit a wide variety of symptoms ranging from coughing to breathing difficulties. It can also cause pneumonia, organ failure, and death in severe cases. Since its incubation period is fourteen days, individuals are expected to stay at home or in isolation if they suspect to contact infected persons.
What started as a pandemic limited in China has evolved into a global epidemic. It has led to the death of about five million confirmed cases and three hundred thousand deaths.

The measures put in place to prevent more infections have contributed to the changing dynamics in the workplace. After recognizing the outbreak in China, the Chinese government responded through a de-facto quarantine adopted by different cities across the world. The quarantine limited individuals' interactions by forcing most individuals to work from home or go on either paid or unpaid leave. WHO guidelines also suggest that individuals must observe social distancing by keeping about three feet between the self and other individuals (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). In effect, businesses are no longer at liberty to operate as they used to before. The pandemic is arguably more than a health crisis. An unprecedented economic crisis accompanies it. Countries worldwide are stressing over the political, economic, and social effects that have longstanding scars (Tan et al., 2020). People are losing jobs every day. Most people are unaware when the pandemic will end as the infection rate continues to increase every day. Therefore, the corona-virus pandemic's onset has resulted in negative effects that will affect the workplace environment.

Problem Statement

The corona-virus pandemic has had a huge effect on the world in different ways. It has affected the political, social, and economic impacts on the world. The virus has forced people to work from home while other businesses have closed shop due to the spread of the virus. The world has witnessed a significant change in the business environment that has not been seen before. However, there is little information concerning the long-term effects since the events of corona-virus are still unfolding within this year. Therefore, exploration and the analysis of how the spread of corona-virus has influenced workers and the workplace environment.

Aims and Objectives

The study aims to establish and explore the effects of corona-virus on the workplace environment and the workforce in the future.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the corona-virus pandemic will change the workplace environment by transforming the workplace environment and workforce in the future.

Research questions.

The research questions in the study are:

1. How does the corona-virus pandemic affect how people relate with each other at work? Will the changes persist in the future?
2. How has the corona-virus pandemic transformed the workplace environment? Are the changes going to persist in the near and far future?

Significance and Justification

The study will be significant for organizations to comprehend the effects of the Corona-virus on how they conduct their businesses. The paper will also provide companies with the knowledge on how to handle the potential changes brought about the pandemic in the future. The information will help firms align their businesses with the changes experienced within the environment. Finally, the study is important since it prepares the organization for future epidemics and equipping them with information on how they can mitigating some of the issues that most businesses have experienced during the outbreak of the corona-virus epidemic.

Literature Review

The onset of the Corona-virus has disrupted the workplace environment, including workplace behaviors and practices. The stay-at-home mandate has forced individuals to work from home. Working from home culture has been ongoing for months since the virus's spread has not yet been mitigated. Only essential service
workers, such as doctors, are allowed to go to their physical work positions. With more individuals working remotely, the world is more likely to experience a huge shift in the future's working space. Organizations will be propelled to open regional working centers (Liu, 2020). The change in how businesses operate will transform company headquarters into a status symbol where employees will only be required to visit them during specific times, such as during the annual general meetings.

The pandemic has also changed how employees communicate and do their work. Most individuals were forced to utilize technological means to communicate and carry out their business activities. According to (Nicola et al., 2020) teachers have been using online classes to students that had never been exposed to such learning environments. According to Meister (2020), businesses will incorporate several changes such as rethinking about their business practices in the future as shown in the graph below.

![Graph showing changes in business practices](image)

Table 1: How the corona-virus will affect the functioning of businesses (Meister, 2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in Business Practice</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross training employees to add new skills</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating new products and services</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-thinking assumptions regarding current business practices</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using this as a learning opportunity to create new courses or new to deal with pandemic</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do not think it could be advantageous</td>
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<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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Businesses have witnessed an increase in the use of emails and online conferencing in place of face-to-face meetings. In effect, the pandemic can be dubbed as a technological equalizer (Williamson et al., 2020). People are slowly becoming accustomed to using specialized tools at work. They are slowly learning how to use these tools that raise questions about the type of behaviors the world should expect after the pandemic. The business world will likely experience agile means of communicating and working. Most meetings will be conducted remotely or through emails, as instant messaging will become the new email. Video conferencing is more likely to replace physical sessions, which will be effective for employees that have problems interacting with others in person. However, more research needs to be conducted concerning the effectiveness of these types of communication since one cannot pick up on other workers' nonverbal cues. In effect, Meister (2020) suggests that businesses will need to incorporate proper training to cater for the changes in the workplace environment as shown in the table below.
Table 2: Significance of training to successfully work from home (Meister, 2020).

For decades, business travel has been the norm in most companies. It provides an opportunity for workers to meet and interact on a personal level. It builds the relationship between workers and helps business persons create more networks with others in the same field. However, the pandemic has shown companies that they can run effectively without meeting in person. The associated benefits, including balancing their budgets and cutting costs, are some of the reasons that will ensure that business travel will be abandoned. Notably, the Corona-virus is associated with social distancing policies, which are more likely to become a norm with time (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Business travel will also be eliminated by the normalization of social distancing rules and the disapproval for large group work events. The events following the corona-virus will have shown managers that business travel is unnecessary due to the successful completion of office duties remotely. Companies have also experienced significant losses, which will propel them to focus on cutting costs, translating into cutting travel budgets.

The health concerns brought about by the corona-virus pandemic are more likely to intensify and change how organizations handle health issues. Most businesses are opening up despite the continued spread of the virus. These businesses are using health checkups and confirmation to justify why they are okay to resume business. Furthermore, most workplaces have adopted on-the-job medical screening ranging from antibody tests and regular temperature checks. Employees in most companies are required to have their body temperatures checked before they enter their work spaces (Cerutti & Grodoski, 2020). The tradition is more likely to stay in the coming future. Legal and health experts advise that companies need to continue with the daily checks as long as they do not discriminate against employees, which would result in an illegal practice. Employees are also required to submit their immunity passports. However, it is uncertain whether organizations will continue with this practice. The uncertainty mainly lies in the effectiveness of fighting the spread of the Corona-virus.

The pandemic also raises questions concerning future impacts on the relationships between employees. Notably, the epidemic has the potential to strengthen future relationships among workers. According to Cerutti and Grodoski (2020) there is a high likelihood that employees have taken for granted their proximity to other employees in the past. The pandemic's effects could act as a learning curve where employees learn how valuable their interactions with other workers are. It is expected that employees will avoid previous working
habits and make an effort to communicate in person. However, the relationships might be reduced further in the future if organizations adopt remote working environments. Some businesses are more likely to allow their employees to work at home without showing the need to work daily. In such environments, employees are more likely to grow more distant since they lack the opportunity to effectively interact with each other.

The workplace could also provide more equitable opportunities for women. The pandemic has forced more businesses to operate remotely. The effectiveness of such policies is more likely to facilitate long-term flexibility that would allow more women to remain in the workforce by providing an opportunity to balance work and home life (Madgavkar et al., 2020). Most career women often take a break from their careers after having children. A lack of employer flexibility usually propels the decision. However, the corona-virus pandemic reveals to most employers that workers can still perform remotely. Despite not being able to solve all equity-related issues at work, the epidemic will result in higher gender equality in the future.

Methodology

The study surveyed a nationally representative random sample of American adults concerning the social, economic, and political characteristics and effects relevant to the corona-virus pandemic. The study employed qualitative research methodology. The survey will be based on the Knowledge Networks online research panel. Knowledge Networks applies a combination of addresses and random-digit-dial probability sampling to recruit panelists. It also provides access to internet services and related equipment when needed. In effect, the panel is representative of the US. population by including a wide variety of households. In this study, a sample of 700 adults aged 18 years and older were surveyed, including models of all races were contacted via email. The survey included participants working in different institutions. The respondents completed the survey between September 20 and October 3. The survey highlighted questions that revolved around the corona-virus pandemic's perceived impact on the workplace and employees (see appendix). Knowledge Networks offered the weighting variables in the data file used to account for the panelists’ recruiting process. The survey also focused on acquiring data from top management in different institutions. A survey was sent to the top management of 200 managers and CEO's to understand the direction their organizations opt to take shortly after the pandemic is over.

Knowledge Networks collected demographic and work variables, including work position, household size, and the living in the metropolitan statistical area. The study evaluated the effect of the corona-virus, including the effects of exposure to the virus, such as social distancing impacts, workplace relationships, and automation at the workplace. The index of corona-virus control measures such as social distancing will be assessed, including responses that estimated what employees and managers felt concerning the need to work from home, reduced probability to attend conventions, and IT training at workplaces. Responses were dichotomous into five categories, including strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree, with scores of 1 to 5 respectively.

Data Analysis

Participant responses were analyzed based on the factors related to the effects of the corona-virus pandemic at workplaces. Eleven variables were used to analyze the findings by identifying how they affect the workforce and workplaces in the future. Only 650 participants and 200 managers fulfilled the requirements to measure research objectives accurately. The study collected the data based on the averages and the standard deviation of the 5 point scale used in the data collection process. The study used Microsoft Excel as the primary tool to analyze the data and prepare visual representations of the data. The final analysis variables explained on the graphs include: maintaining social distance, on-the-job health screening, offices as a status symbol, increased online communication, reduced work travel, increased work relationships, continued use of sanitizers and face masks, increased remote working, improved career opportunities for women, increased automation, and increased IT training. The collected data were analyzed using Excel to provide the following results.

Table one highlights employee responses related to the future impacts of the corona-virus pandemic on the workplace environment. Collected data reveals that most employees (60 percent) believe that the epidemic
will significantly affect their workplaces, with the most significant impact being how they relate with other employees with a low standard deviation of 0.5. They reported scores of identifying that 53.33 percent of employees expect that the pandemic will result in the need to continue maintaining social distance, working remotely, increased demand for online communication, and advanced IT training. Responses showed that employees were unsure about the potential effects of incorporating mandatory testing, offices being used for official purposes only, and increased career opportunities for women. However, employees disagreed that the pandemic would result in the continued use of masks since 33.33 percent of employees did not view the essence of continuing with the use of sanitizers and face masks.

Table 3: Employee Responses Concerning the Future Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Work Environments

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<tr>
<td>Maintain social distance in the future</td>
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<td>Of offices will transform into a status symbol</td>
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<td>Of offices will transform into a status symbol</td>
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<td>Meetings will be replaced by online communication methods such as email and instant messaging</td>
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<td>Remote working</td>
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Responses from managers indicated that they believed the workplace would change significantly in the future. 73.3 percent of managers agreed that there would be an increase in automation within the workplace environment. Sixty percent foresaw the continued use of online communications, such as using email and instant messaging. Only 53 percent believed that office spaces would continue to incorporate IT training in their institutions. 46.67 percent of the managers saw workplaces' potential to adopt medical screening as a standard office practice. They also believed that the office would not be used more often with reduced work travel. However, only 40 percent of the managers believed in incorporating work travel as a future work environment standard. The findings are expressed further in table 2.
Maintain social distance in the future
Incorporate mandatory medical screening
Of f i ces will transform into a status symbol
Meet i ngs will be replaced by online communicat i on methods such as email
Reduced likelihood to at tend convent i ons
Increased value for work friendships
Continue the use of sanit i zers and facemasks
Remote working
Increase of career women
Increased automation
Increased IT learning

Table 4: Manager Responses Concerning the Future Impact of the Corona-virus Pandemic on Work Environments

Table 5: Overall Responses Concerning the Future Impact of the Corona-virus Pandemic on Work Environments

Discussion

Research findings suggest that both managers and employees believe that the corona-virus pandemic will transform the workforce and workplace environment. Both employees and managers believe that individuals have become accustomed to social distancing. The one-meter rule and reduced number of people in a meeting are the critical drivers behind significant changes among employees and workplace environments. Assuming that a vaccine or cure for corona-virus is discovered, individuals have noticed the essence of social distancing, which has reduced the number of airborne infections that people receive, such as the common flu. Influenza infections are often spread further by close contact. Social distancing helps reduce the spread of such diseases since it reduces the level of exposure to virus droplets that result in infections (Fong et al., 2020). Furthermore, Gardner et al. (2012), adopting a specific practice over long periods, transcends into forming a habit. Coupled with adopting a common social distance habit, it is predicted that it will become a habit in the future. The social distance rule is bound to change several factors concerning workplace dynamics.
The initial impact concerning the workplace environment after the pandemic is how individuals communicate at work. Both employees and managers believe that the workplace is more likely to integrate online communication in the future. The epidemic has transformed how individuals in work spaces communicate. Emails and online conferencing has eliminated the need for office in-person discussions and break rooms. It has made older methods obsolete as employees and managers have learned the essence of changing their approaches. Notably, organizations have witnessed that online communication has several benefits ranging from the potential to ease communication to saving time (Jones, 2015). Managers have also seen that online communication saves money compared to traditional communication methods. Most businesses will reduce work travel by replacing it with video conferencing is one of the ways used to save on cash while facilitating communication. However, the preference for online communication is accompanied by some adverse effects, such as the inability to effectively understand messages since not all modes provide the opportunity to read non-verbal cues. From this perspective, future workplaces are more likely to adopt online communication approaches.

The resultant effect associated with online communications preference is the increased probability for future workplaces to become more open to remote working. Employees believe in the importance of remote working, which involves working from home for longer hours compared to office work. However, only 40 percent of the managers believe that the office dynamic will change regarding remote working. They agree that businesses will allow remote working but only to a small degree. Some roles cannot be carried out while working at home. For instance, manufacturing companies need workers to go to work, as described in traditional work models. Moreover, remote working is also associated with other adverse effects that involve mental health issues. Staying and working from home creates a sense of isolation, which often leads to increased cases of depression and anxiety (Feijt et al., 2020). However, companies are more likely to adopt relaxed rules concerning the need to complete work at a specific time. Most organizations have set their working hours to eight hours with a particular check-in and check-out times. Most workers juggle different situations in life, including home life and work life. Employers are more likely to respect employees' work flexibility based on the success rate evidenced by employees working from home during the pandemic (Spurk & Straub, 2020). From this perspective, organizations will be able to instill a sense of culture by setting their expectations and improving their communication. Thus, despite companies' probability of accommodating remote working practices, the changes would not be as significant in the future as assumed. In effect, organizations are less likely to incorporate remote working in the future exhaustively.

The economic effects caused by the corona-virus pandemic has a significant impact on gender equality at work. Previous recessions tend to have negative implications for men than women. Nonetheless, the epidemic effects are more likely to have more negative impacts on sectors with high female employment rates. Notably, the closure of schools and daycare has increased childcare needs that will affect women's ability to attend work. The effects are believed to have more persistent effects after the pandemic because of high returns to experience. Aside from the immediate crisis, the epidemic is believed to have opposing forces that might drive gender equality at work (Way et al., 2020). Employees and managers believe in the significant shift in workplace environments. The pandemic has facilitated the adoption of flexible work arrangements that can remain present for long periods. Additionally, the epidemic and working from home order have propelled most fathers to have primary responsibility for child care that may result in the erosion of social norms that have previously led to labor division (Alon et al., 2020). Women will have more potential to follow their careers without discrimination. Nevertheless, the corona-virus pandemic's effects might not solve the problem of gender equality at work by a large portion (Blaskó et al., 2020). Therefore, the after-effects of the corona-virus pandemic might make workplaces more equitable for women.

Social distancing during the corona-virus pandemics can also have potential effects on how employees relate with each other at work. Most employees believe that after the epidemic, most employees are more likely to form close relationships. The pandemic was followed by protocols requiring employees to work from home or avoid social contact and gathering. The experience will function as an eye-opener to most employees. They will notice that they have taken granted their ability and opportunity to see their coworkers in the past. When
workers go back to work, they are more likely to drop their previous habits and find more time to interact with each other in person.

Employees and administrative personnel predict that the pandemic will increase on-the-job health screening. After returning to work, employees will be required to pass the health tests, such as the antibody tests, to evaluate an employee's health situation. The use of masks and sanitizers is not well established among employees and managers. However, it can be argued that a significant portion of individuals will continue to use sanitizers at work due to the knowledge gained that they can stop the spread of the virus. Masks have not been well accepted by a significant portion of people (Hartley & Jarvis, 2020). This means that they will no longer be in use in future work environments. There is also the potential of employees turning face masks into office apparel. Therefore, it is still unclear about the health-office factors that will occur after the pandemic.

The pandemic has revealed the potential acceleration of automation in the future. The assumption is mainly held among managers more than employees in the study. For years, futurists have predicted the potential of robots to reduce employment opportunities. The pandemic has only heightened the fears associated with increased automation (Blit, 2020). Social distancing measures have driven most organizations to identify ways to work with few employees. The effects of the pandemic have resulted in an accelerated need for labor automation. Companies recognize that algorithms and robots have the potential to complete human labor tasks without getting sick (Coombs, 2020). With proper programming skills, automation has the potential to provide more accurate results than humans. In the past, companies have been taking slow steps towards automating repetitive work. For instance, drones have been used to deliver goods and to streamline manufacturing. The pandemic only makes companies adopt automation much faster, which might increase unemployment rates. Thus, companies are more likely to increase automation after the epidemic.

Increasing demand for automation could increase the need for digital training. Employers and workers alike notice the essence of closing the digital divide. Notably, a significant number of Americans lack access to the internet. The problem indicates that most individuals are unable to work from home or remotely. For decades, discussions about the digital divide have been aired in public and private domains (Blit, 2020). However, the pandemic has put more spotlight on the need to close the digital divide. Government and private entities have witnessed the significance of increasing broadband structure and IT training in the future. Therefore, most organizations will pay close attention to bridging the digital divide.

Conclusion and Future Research Implications

Within a few months, the corona-virus pandemic has transformed and affected people's lives at work and at home. Coupled with the current unemployment rate in the US., the nation is more likely to experience more debilitating effects since the country will experience a corona virus-induced recession. The stay-at-home mandate and social distancing rules will significantly impact how workers relate and the workplace environment. The study reveals that future workplaces should anticipate continued social distancing rules, the need for increased automation, increased remote working, and IT training. Women are also more likely to benefit through an improved opportunity to incorporate gender equality. However, most workplaces are less likely to continue using sanitizers through regular health screening might become a standard work practice.

However, the research is impacted by study limitations that affect its efficacy to provide information to organizations and their staff concerning future operations. Notably, the study utilizes a small sample size, which is difficult to extrapolate into national and global outcomes. The research findings might have different results from other workplaces and regions based on geographical, cultural, and economic differences. Additionally, the study is limited by the reliance on managers' and employees' responses biased. Employees would be biased into believing that the workplace would accommodate remote working measures, which is beneficial for them. Similarly, managers might be biased into thinking that organizations will adopt measures simply because of their ability to save costs and not their applicability. Therefore, future studies need to further explore the topic by analyzing the effect of different geographical, cultural, and economic factors that can affect organizations' ability to adapt to the changes experienced during the corona-virus pandemic in the future.
References


Appendix

Survey Questions

1. Employees and managers will continue to maintain social distance in the future.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

2. Mandatory medical screening is important at the workplace.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

3. Organizations will continue to enforce mandatory medical screening in the future.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

4. Headquarters will no longer be considered as an important place that workers need to go on all work days.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

5. Online communications will become a norm in office communications in the future.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

6. Companies will reduce the number of conventions and conferences.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

7. Employees will be less inclined to attend conventions and conferences.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

8. Employees will value their work friendships.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

9. Employees and managers will continue to use facemasks and sanitizers.
   
   □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
   
   Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

10. Organizations will employ remote working.
    
    □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
    
    Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

11. Women will increase in the workplace.
    
    □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
    
    Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree

12. Companies will increase the use of technology.
    
    □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □
    
    Strongly disagree  disagree  neither agree nor disagree  agree  strongly agree
21. Companies will increase IT learning.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree