

Remote Work Evolution: Contrasting Realities in China and US

Xiaowen Ding*

School of Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

*Corresponding author: xiaowen_d@cmu.ac.th

Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to industries, increasing the uncertainty and dynamics of operations. In this context, digital transformation becomes a core approach for organizations to address challenges. The purpose of this article is to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected remote work in China and the United States, compare the disparities in telework between the two nations, and evaluate the implementation of remote work during and after the pandemic. Digital transformation has become the cornerstone of long-term organizational competitiveness and sustainability, increasing an organization's agility, innovation potential, and internal collaboration efficiency. There are cultural, regulatory, and technological infrastructure differences between China and the United States when it comes to remote work practices. In the early days of the epidemic, companies in both countries quickly promoted remote working due to policy support, industry culture, and digital infrastructure. After the epidemic, Chinese companies resumed traditional offline office models, while the United States was more inclined to support remote work. In the future, China's office model may develop towards a hybrid work model, emphasizing digital transformation to support remote work. This article recommends that companies adopt flexible working systems, strengthen employee skills training, and build on a culture of trust. In terms of outlook, hybrid working models will attract high-quality employees and require the exploration of new management methods to adapt to remote working models.

Keywords: Digital transformation; Remote work; Hybrid work model.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic, an array of challenges has emerged across diverse sectors worldwide. The operational landscape has witnessed a substantial surge in dynamics and uncertainty. In response, organizations find themselves compelled to reevaluate their operational paradigms and proactively seek adaptive resolutions to secure business continuity. Foremost among these strategies stands digital transformation, which has emerged as a pivotal approach to address this challenge. This research endeavors to illuminate the expeditious strides that organizations are undertaking in the realm of digital transformation amidst the COVID-19 crisis, given its unequivocal significance.

Primarily, digital transformation transcends its immediate crisis-driven applications to emerge as a cornerstone of long-term organizational competitiveness and sustainability. It imbues organizations with the dexterity to adeptly navigate change and furnishes employees with increased opportunities for remote work, thereby augmenting flexibility and productivity. Subsequently, digital transformation assumes a central role in enhancing the innovative potential of organizations. Through the assimilation of digital technologies, organizations can foster enriched customer engagement, cultivate novel business models, expedite the delivery of products and services, and, in turn, better align with market imperatives. Ultimately, digital transformation assumes a pivotal function in bolstering intra-organizational collaboration and communication, fostering the dissemination of information, curbing redundant tasks, and amplifying operational efficiency.

1.2. Related Research

Hai et al. conducted a comprehensive investigation into the cognitive development, positive implications, and imperative nature of digital transformation in the context of the COVID-19

pandemic's influence on this process. Their research employed a mixed methods approach, primarily emphasizing qualitative research, and employed a systematic literature review to delve into the domain of digital transformation. Their findings underscore the significance of digital transformation as a pivotal trend contributing significantly to the advancement of both public and private sector entities, exerting a profound impact across various sectors. This is particularly evident amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. Klein et al. offered an extensive analysis of the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the role of digital transformation in their adaptation strategies. Their study, utilizing a literature review approach, scrutinized the knowledge management strategies adopted by SMEs to counter the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis and future uncertainties. The research revealed that SMEs implemented diverse measures, including staff reductions, temporary or permanent closures, digitalization, and forging strategic partnerships, to mitigate the financial impact of the crisis. The study elucidates how SMEs can adapt to and exploit opportunities arising from digital transformation [2]. Priyono et al. conducted an exhaustive examination of the transformation of business models within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), bolstered by digital technologies as a response to the environmental changes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through qualitative analysis, employing a multi-case study design and theoretical sampling techniques, the study identified the challenges confronted by SMEs during the epidemic and the digital transformation strategies they employed. The research insights shed light on the proactive actions undertaken by SMEs to acclimate to the evolving business landscape and harness digital technologies for survival and growth [3].

Soto-Acosta et al. delved deeply into the ramifications of digital transformation on work structures and organizations, especially within the realm of the COVID-19 pandemic. They observed that digital transformation has expedited changes across numerous industries, impacting every facet of the economy from production to consumption. Emphasizing that digital transformation signifies not just the utilization of digital technology to alter a business but also a fundamental overhaul of an enterprise's business model [4]. Agostino et al. examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the digital transformation of public service delivery and conducted an empirical analysis based on data from 100 Italian national museums. They identified three primary dilemmas in service delivery: user participation, planning and control, and cost. The study highlighted the potency of digital technologies, particularly social media, as an effective tool for providing public services when in-person services are unfeasible [5]. Gabryelczyk et al. extensively discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the digital transformation of public administration agencies and scrutinized the measures adopted by these departments during the epidemic. Their conclusion emphasized that the COVID-19 outbreak accelerated the digital transformation of public administration agencies, underscoring the necessity for these agencies to plan their digital transformation based on the lessons derived from the COVID-19 experience [6].

Kudyba et al. explored the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital transformation and the future of work, compelling companies to adapt to technology-centric operational models and hasten digital transformation. They emphasized the importance of elements shaping the future of work, encompassing the interaction between employees and technology, as well as the utilization of evolving technologies like artificial intelligence to enhance operations. These elements are deemed essential for survival in the disruptive economic environment brought about by the pandemic [7]. Nagel et al. conducted a survey on the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform during the epidemic, probing into predictions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the digital transformation of work. Survey outcomes revealed an accelerated digital transformation in response to the pandemic. The increasing willingness of people to transition from specialized to digital work underscores the evolving importance of various forms of work owing to COVID-19 [8].

Mugge et al. employed the Digital Patterns Survey to concentrate on critical issues encountered by organizations involved in digital transformation. The study delineated how companies execute digital transformation and the disparities between digitally mature and evolving companies. The study emphasized the significance of adapting and effecting timely changes to maintain competitiveness in

the digital economy [9]. Fletcher et al. deliberated on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on digital transformation and organizational maturity, utilizing a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) lens. The study concluded that organizations should reflect on their responses to the outbreak and utilize the VUCA model to reimagine their business strategies, fostering agility and digital enablement. Learning from organizational responses is deemed pivotal in shaping improved future crisis responses [10].

1.3. Objective

This article aims to explore and compare the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on remote work practices in China and the United States. It delves into the differences in cultural, regulatory, and technological infrastructure between the two countries and how these differences have impacted the implementation and progression of remote working during and after the pandemic. The paper mainly consists of two chapters. Chapter 2 mainly analyzes the impact of the epidemic on remote work practices in China and the United States. Chapter 3 mainly analyzes the reasons, suggestions, and prospects for remote work in the two countries.

2. The Impact of the Epidemic on Remote Working

2.1. Comparison of Basic Conditions for Remote Working Between China and the United States

First, it is worth pointing out that there are significant cultural and regulatory differences between China and the United States. In China, the government usually adopts a more centralized management model and implements strict supervision systems for enterprises and employees. As a result, telecommuting in China often requires following specific regulations and vetted procedures. In comparison, the United States pays more attention to the autonomy of enterprises and the personal freedom of employees. This cultural difference makes it easier for U.S. businesses to develop and enforce telework policies with relatively little government intervention.

Secondly, it is worth noting that there are certain differences in technological infrastructure between the two countries. China has made significant progress in digital infrastructure and has a strong internet and mobile payment system, factors that help support the implementation and promotion of remote work. Relatively speaking, the digital infrastructure in the United States is also quite developed, but in some remote areas, the penetration of Internet connections may not be as widespread as in China. This may affect the feasibility of remote working to some extent.

The history and application of remote working in China and the United States: before and after the outbreak, the rapid implementation of remote working by Chinese and American companies was regulated by multiple influencing factors. In terms of policy support, the Chinese government actively encouraged companies to adopt remote working in the early stages of the epidemic to reduce the risk of virus transmission. The government has issued a series of policies to support the use of digital tools such as electronic signatures and remote identity verification to facilitate employees working from home. Accordingly, the U.S. government has also provided some tax and regulatory conveniences to encourage companies to adopt remote work. However, early in the pandemic, the federal government did not develop a unified telework policy, which gave states more autonomy to dictate policies.

In terms of industry culture, some high-tech and Internet companies in China had already adopted flexible working arrangements before the pandemic and actively encouraged remote working. This culture facilitates the rapid implementation of remote work. Similarly, some industries in the United States, particularly in the technology and internet sectors, have been early adopters of a remote work culture. However, traditional industries are often more reliant on physical offices, which has led to additional challenges for some companies as they pivot to remote work.

In terms of digital infrastructure, China is relatively strong in this regard, with extensive mobile payment, cloud computing, and e-commerce systems, providing strong support for remote working.

The United States also has a strong digital infrastructure, but in some regions and industries, improvements in broadband coverage and access to digital tools may be needed.

Talking about the development history of remote work in the United States, we can learn that the United States has been promoting remote work since the end of the 20th century, mainly in high-tech companies and multinational enterprises. Companies like Google, Amazon, and Microsoft have always supported remote working and provided a high degree of work flexibility. Telecommuting in the United States emphasizes employees' freedom of choice, including when and where to work, often using a variety of collaboration tools and virtual meetings. And China has rapidly developed telecommuting over the past decade, especially among companies in big cities. China's Internet giants, such as Tencent, Alibaba, and Huawei, have played a key role in remote working and promoted digital transformation. China's remote working methods usually focus on fixed remote working days, combined with online collaboration tools, while focusing on real-time communication and supervision.

There are also differences in the application of remote working between China and the United States. U.S. technology companies have been at the forefront of remote working, especially in the Silicon Valley region. And telecommuting in the United States emphasizes employees' free choice, including working time and location, which helps improve employees' job satisfaction and creativity. U.S. companies widely use tools such as Zoom, Slack, Microsoft Teams, etc. to promote remote collaboration. China's Internet giants, such as Tencent and Alibaba, actively supported remote work during the pandemic and also promoted remote work in their company culture. Many Chinese companies implement fixed-point remote working, with employees usually working from home on certain days and in the office the rest of the time. Chinese companies emphasize real-time communication tools such as WeChat and DingTalk in remote working to quickly respond to work needs.

2.2. The Situation of Remote Working in China and the United States After the Pandemic Is Over

Although offline offices in China face multiple difficulties such as traffic congestion and long commuting times, which increase work pressure and reduce the quality of life for employees, after the pandemic, the vast majority of Chinese companies still stick to the traditional offline office model instead of choosing Continue to work remotely.

In the United States, companies in the technology sector are likely to continue to support and promote remote working because they already have a competitive advantage in this area. Some companies may adopt a hybrid work model that allows employees to work remotely as needed and provide office space to facilitate team collaboration. Different industries will respond differently, with service industries likely to be more inclined to return to traditional working methods, while technology and finance sectors may be more inclined to continue working remotely. The company will continue to pay attention to employee needs and feedback to adjust working methods and improve employee satisfaction.

3. Analysis, Suggestions, and Prospects for the Causes of the Above Impacts

The majority of Chinese businesses continue to rely on the conventional offline office model and have decided against continuing to utilize remote office methods. The Chinese culture's focus on face-to-face communication, collaboration, and teamwork has caused this phenomenon, as traditional work practices tend to prioritize the physical workplace. Companies have been compelled to adhere to traditional methods of operation due to this cultural inclination. Secondly, the traditional offline office model makes it easier for management to supervise employees, maintain work discipline, and promote communication and teamwork. Despite the swift advancement of China's Internet infrastructure, there is still an uneven distribution of network connections and digital devices in remote areas and sub-first-tier cities, which could impede the possibility of remote work. During the

pandemic, China has created a set of regulations to control remote work and guarantee that employee rights and taxes are appropriately managed, yet these regulations will restrict the ability of businesses to embrace remote working. The US has seen a shift towards remote working in recent years, which is why more businesses in the country have opted to work from home following the pandemic. This working model has been adopted by many companies before the pandemic. Subsequently, due to the focus on individual liberty and variety in American society, many businesses have become more open to giving their personnel more options, including the ability to work remotely. The United States also has developed technology and digital infrastructure, making remote work easier to implement. The U.S. government has provided some regulations and tax incentives to encourage remote work, especially during the pandemic. At the same time, to attract and retain high-quality employees, American companies have increasingly tended to provide remote work options, which is also in line with employee expectations.

For China to also enter the era of remote work as soon as possible and seek more flexibility, this article puts forward the following suggestions. First, Chinese companies can develop more specific work goals and performance evaluation systems to ensure employees understand their tasks and goals and establish clear performance standards so that they can be effectively evaluated. Secondly, organizations should introduce flexible working systems, combine the advantages of online and offline working, and implement partial remote working policies to improve employees' job satisfaction and flexibility. Companies also need to strengthen communication and supervision, use technological tools to enhance communication and ensure regular communication and feedback mechanisms to establish transparent and efficient communication channels between employees and management. Moreover, organizations can also provide employees with necessary skills training and development opportunities to stimulate their self-motivation and professional growth, thereby enhancing work engagement. Finally, the company needs to establish a culture of trust. Through the construction of a culture of mutual trust and common goals, employees can feel the management's trust in them, thereby improving employees' sense of responsibility and work efficiency.

In response to this phenomenon, this article also provides an outlook on China's office model. China's future office model may tend to be hybrid work, that is, a combination of remote working and offline working. This allows for greater flexibility while continuing to enjoy the benefits of a traditional office. Companies can also proactively pursue digital transformation to better support remote working, including the adoption of digital processes, cloud computing, and online collaboration tools. Moreover, organizations that embrace hybrid working models can attract and retain more high-quality employees because they will have more flexibility in where they choose to work, thereby making the company more competitive. Companies will also need to explore new management methods to accommodate hybrid working models. This includes adopting results-based management rather than traditional attendance monitoring.

4. Conclusion

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article focuses on the importance of digital transformation for organizations and its impact on remote working, compares the differences and development history of remote working between China and the United States, and analyzes the end of the epidemic situation that arises later.

Digital transformation is not just a key strategy to deal with the current crisis, it is also a cornerstone of long-term organizational competitiveness and sustainability. Its role covers promoting flexibility and productivity, enhancing innovation potential, enhancing internal collaboration and communication, and improving operational efficiency. Comparing the development of telecommuting between China and the United States, China has traditionally preferred the physical office model, while the United States began to promote and accept telecommuting earlier, especially in the technology field. China faces multiple constraints such as culture, infrastructure, and policies, which have led to a tendency to stick to traditional work models after the epidemic is over. On the

other hand, the United States supports and promotes remote working more, especially in the fields of technology and finance.

In response to the situation in China, the article recommends that companies develop clearer work goals and performance evaluation systems, introduce flexible work systems, strengthen communication and supervision, provide necessary skills training and development opportunities, and establish a culture of trust. Outlook for China's future office model includes the trend toward hybrid work, the continued advancement of digital transformation to support remote work, attracting and retaining high-quality employees, and exploring new management methods to adapt to the hybrid work model.

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