WORKING FROM HOME
A PSA Perspective

1. Introduction

The work environment has been changing rapidly over the past few decades. Whilst the introduction of computers in the early 1980's and the subsequent growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Robotics in the last few decades have significantly mechanised the workplace, the era of pandemics, such as the outbreak of Corona Virus (COVID-19) in 2019, has added new dimensions to the workplace.

There is no denying that improvements on such critical aspects of workplace environmental health and safety, and general hygiene were accelerated thanks to COVID-19. The use of technology, especially online rather than contact meetings, too, has become the order of the day. However, it is the aspect of 'working from home' that has been a source of discontent among workers, weakening the bonds of solidarity on the shop floor. The absence of a clear framework on who is eligible to work from home and who isn't compounded the problem. It is this lack of a framework that has created room for abuse by insidious managers who are neither infallible nor immune from favoritism.

Meanwhile the nature of the work performed by the civil service in its entirety is not only crucial, but also essential. By essential we refer to its indispensability, not what is denoted in the regulatory framework for industrial actions. From doctors and nurses to police and soldiers; from rubbish collectors to road maintenance workers; from teachers to tax collectors; there is no single job that is not important. Thus, in contributing towards a framework that will guide the future of work or put differently, the workplace of the future, it is important to reflect on the meaning and implications of civil service working from home. This is precisely the *leitmotif* of this paper.

2. The importance of the civil service

Civil service is the cornerstone of any government and a nation. The provision of public infrastructure and public amenities, the regulation of public spaces, safeguarding life, and property, protecting the sovereignty of the state, the shaping, implementation and or enforcement of public policy, among others, is all dependent on the civil service. It cannot be taken for granted that most of the work provided for by the civil service is what stands between life and death, if not the collective future of a nation. Hence it is crucial that the public service is not only professional, but is efficient, consistent and the service that is rendered is of high quality.

In South Africa the public service is the single largest employer with 1 230 835 employees as of February 2022. These include employees of all three spheres of government from national, provincial, and local government and public entities commonly known as the state-owned enterprises. Meanwhile, the PSA with its more than 235 000 members, is one of the largest Unions in the civil service. So crucial is the work of the civil service and so huge is the size of the civil service workforce that an industrial action can create chaos and mayhem. Lives would be lost, families would be distraught, and people's dreams would be deferred. That is how central civil service is to our lives.

While it is true that there is a booming private sector that is providing parallel services, it can never be adequate to cover the scope and the wider reach of the public service. There is no society that can solely depend on the private sector and thrive. Civil service is the engine that sets the train of development in motion. It is for these reasons that we consider the civil service as the cornerstone that anchors the stability of a government and keeps the hopes of a nation aflame.

3. Working from home

The phenomenon of working from home is not a new one. It has been practiced by corporates for years. In the civil service, too, it has existed for years, albeit that it has hitherto not been formalised. A majority of civil servants would attest that the workload in the civil service is huge and impossible to

complete within the regulated office hours (eight at most). As a result, they do "homework", stealing from the precious time they need to spend with their loved ones at home.

The truth is that if civil servants did not take work home, very little will be accomplished in the civil service and backlogs will rise. The many meetings that civil servants are required to attend also take too much of their time away from real work. Hence, most civil servants sacrifice their private time in order to catch up, cover ground, ensure deadlines are met and that services are provided timeously. For this crop of dedicated civil servants, working from home is neither a choice nor a luxury, but a necessity.

While the idea of working from home may, at face value, look enticing, it also takes a lot of financial sacrifices from the workers concerned. Indeed, there are benefits for workers as they can save from the cost of transport and the time spent on travel to and from work. Instead that time can be used productively. However, there are other expenses that may not be catered for that the employee may have to bear. By working from home, the employee bears the overhead costs that should be borne by the employers. The office space, the electricity and water costs, and in some cases internet connectivity, are some of the hidden costs that are incurred by employees. It is unfortunate that the system doesn't have a way or a method to recognise, let alone reward these sacrifices made by the workers when they work from home.

Working from home doesn't mean that the workload is reduced. If anything, that is a fallacy. The contrary is actually the case. Most employees would attest that instead of reducing, the workload is far greater, and the turnaround times are short. Unlike in the office environment where you can call on colleagues to do bits of work that feeds into the final output, working from home reduces dependence on others. This is when you realise the invaluable contribution of colleagues, let alone the support staff, to the work of the unit or department. Working from home teaches you humility and appreciation of others.

Meanwhile, the aftermath of the outbreak of COVID-19 created grounds for the formalisation of the phenomenon of working from home for civil servants. The state of disaster, the attendant risks on health and safety, underscored the urgency for formalisation to happen. However, questions abound on whether this should be maintained and sustained outside the parameters of the state of disaster. What impact would it have on service delivery if working from home was to become the norm? How should it be regulated? These are crucial questions that both the public and civil servants should ponder seriously.

4. Our perspective

As a Union in the civil service, the PSA desires a framework that is fair, equitable and just. Equally, those who do homework must be given due recognition for their sacrifice. The PSA's view is that working from home must be regulated and the criteria used for eligibility must be clear and transparent. The decision on who gets to work from home or not should not be on the whim of the bosses. It must be a function of well-articulated criterion, the type of service involved and the extent to which its implementation doesn't compromise service delivery.

The public service in its entirety is at the coalface of service delivery. Thus, it is crucial that the framework that guides the implementation of the concept of working from home should take into cognizance the implications for services delivery. Civil service exists to serve the public. The method and approach of working from home in the civil service should never compromise this important objective – to serve the public!

As there are positives, let alone, benefits to working from home, there are serious constraints as well. Working from home demands a high level of self-discipline on the part of the employee. Temptations and distractions away from work are high. The system of working from home cannot succeed in the absence of a strong work ethic and a culture of service. We need to inculcate a culture of service that puts people first, *a la* Batho Pele. A civil service imbued with a culture that puts people first, that shows compassion and dedication towards service, should form the foundation on which the idea of working from home should be based and introduced.

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A system to monitor and measure the work that is being carried out must also be put in place if performance and outcomes are to be guaranteed. Yet, it is true that it would be easier for output driven work to be measured than work that is monotonous. Similarly, even in the same sector or work environment, there are functions that can be performed at home and those that cannot. A clerk at a health department can take files to compute them at home while a medical doctor cannot perform surgery from the comfort of his study room at home. An administrator at the department of transport can hold an online meeting from home, but a road maintenance worker cannot fix potholes from home. Hence, a blanket approach – a one size fits all approach – cannot work.

Workers, too, are different; there are those who are self-driven and those that require constant supervision for their work. The regulations, the systems to monitor and to measure the work being done cannot be the same. What is clear, though, is that a system of accountability should be put in place whenever civil servants are expected to work from home. That system should be clearly defined in the framework and must not trample upon the worker's basic rights.

The interdependent nature of the civil service also calls for a system that is dynamic and outward-looking in its approach. The reality is that what happens in one department can affect the services rendered by another. Allowing the road-maintenance workers to stay home may be the right thing to do during a state of disaster. However, it could also have serious consequences for the very same people we sought to protect. For instance, ambulances transporting COVID-19 patients also needed to drive on well-maintained roads for them to arrive on time for the care of the patients. Thus, the decisions on who is eligible to work from home must also be cognizant of the implications for other departments. Hence, there is a need for interdepartmental conversations and a comprehensive overview of the implications of the decisions made in silo or in a sector.

5. Conclusion

It is true that the COVID-19 pandemic and the wave of the Fourth Industrial Revolution have been altering the workplace. A hybrid work environment in which people can work from the office as well as from the comfort of their homes, is unavoidable. This represents the future of work. The idea of working from home is upon us and many workplaces are adapting their work in line with these new developments. The public service cannot afford to be left behind. It has no choice but to adapt with the new methods of working and the new tools.

Yet, in adapting to these new conditions, the civil service must implement a just, fair, and equitable system. It must regulate the process, be transparent about the eligibility criterion and the process thereof. It must introduce systems to monitor and measure the work done; recognise and incentivise those who do well. However, working from home must not be implemented at the expense of service. Public service must, at all times, prioritise the citizens and serve public good!