

GENERATION Z IN UNCERTAIN TIME OF SARS-COV-2 – HOW DO THEY FEEL FAR AWAY FROM OFFICE?

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Purpose: In response to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, many employers have decided to switch to remote work. This form of work has become a new professional reality for employees representing all generations. Each of them in their own way found themselves in these new working conditions. The article focuses on the experience of the youngest cohort of workers in this regard. The main goal of the paper is to recognize the experience of Generation Z employees in the area of remote work and to identify key factors that, in the opinion of representatives of Generation Z, favor or limit remote work in an uncertain time of Covid-19.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors conducted a diagnostic survey with a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was carried out using the CAWI method. It was filled in by 334 respondents who represent Generation Z, professionally active, who worked remotely during the pandemic. As many as 310 questionnaires were selected for the final analysis.

Findings: Young people like the model of remote work because they can derive many benefits from it. Representatives of Generation Z wonder whether the return to office work will deprive them of their privileges and make them submit to a certain discipline and rules applicable there.

Research limitations/implications: Due to the limitations of the research sample it is important to underline that generalizing the research results must be done with caution. The authors of the article intend to continue the research carried out on the discussed topic, as well as in the field of adaptability to remote work of other three generations: Y, X, and BB.

Practical implications: Recognition of experience of both employers and young employees in the field of remote work, there is a great opportunity for new solutions in HRM and work management, more relevant to the challenges of the pandemic and post-pandemic world of work.

Originality/value: The paper analyzes the remote work experience of employees in pandemic reality. Its value is to look at the issue from the perspective of the experience of the youngest employees representing Generation Z. The article is addressed to human resources managers.

Keywords: Generation Z, remote work, advantages, disadvantages of remote work.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction. Generation Z facing the remote work mode – general characteristics

Numerous studies on Generation Z show that its representatives value work life balance and flexibility in the workplace much more than previous generations. Generation Z believes that it is a mandate for the organizations to provide flexibility as it increases productivity and efficiency. The denial of flexible work organisation rises the impression that their managers do not trust them (Lanier, 2017; Chillakuri, Mahanandia, 2018; Nieżurawska-Zajac, 2020). Young employees expect their employers to secure a wide variety of flexible solutions pertaining to the forms of work organization as well as the time of work. These should include, among others, enabling employees to perform work outside the place of its permanent performance in the form of telework or remote work (Kantar TNS, 2018; Kopertyńska, 2020).

Until a few years ago, teleworking was considered a kind of a 'luxury good' available to those of specific sectors of activity only. Employers, however, were not much fond of it (Eurostat, 2018). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has initiated a kind of revolution in this area. The need to restrict interpersonal contacts, and thus reduce the risk of infections transmission, made those employers, who had such opportunities, implement remote work on a massive scale and at an unprecedented pace (Instytut Badawczy IPC, 2020). Even organizations that had previously resisted the idea of remote work were forced to change and adapt to the new reality and do it quickly (Rai, 2020). Rapid and massive shift from work in presence to remote work was a challenge not only for employers and managers but mainly for employees whose work environment and work rules changed overnight. Remote work in the conditions of the COVID 19 pandemic has become the new professional standard for employees representing different generations. Both the older ones, who experienced many years of work in the office, had to learn to work remotely, but also the youngest ones, for whom the remote work featured their first job. Everyone, in their own way, experienced and coped with advantages so intensified by the pandemic reality as well as disadvantages (Birimoglu, Begen, 2022).

Researchers analyze the remote work experience of employees in pandemic reality. It is interesting to look at the issue from the perspective of experience of different generations of employees. This article focuses on such experience of the youngest employees representing Generation Z. On the one hand, this generation is most acquainted with technology and expecting their employers to secure flexibility in terms of time, space and practice. That is why they should perceive the switching to remote work as a solution that meets their needs and

expectations hence increasing their motivation. On the other hand, many young Z-ers were forced into remote work just as they were starting their professional life (Bruner, 2021).

Some of the most exciting perks about a job, highly valued by Generation Z workers, are the company's culture, socializing with coworkers and finding a mentor they can really connect with. In the initial years of their careers, they need a personal connection with colleagues, team members, managers and leaders (Grow, Yang, 2018; Tulgan, 2016). Young Z'ers expect their peers, seniors, and managers to help them understand the organization, culture and work. They would like to have frequent contact with their direct manager and preferably a face-to-face conversation rather than a videoconference or a skype call. They want to go to the office every day in the initial days of employment until they believe they can do work alone from home (Chillakuri, 2020).

Unfortunately, many employees from Generation Z, who began their professional career in purely remote work environment, specifically in organizations of little experience in remote work area, had no chance to live the working life they dreamt of during college. They do not experience the in-person onboarding, networking and training that they would have expected in 'normal' employment circumstances. It is very important for leaders and managers to diagnose the experience of young Z-ers in this area, to find out how they coped with remote work, what problems they faced and why, etc. Their experience will set expectations and attitudes toward work that is moving forward. The knowledge we have on this subject and the way we use it will decide if the Z-ers feel included and engaged at work (Microsoft, 2021).

This article fits into the above-outlined issues. Its main goal is to recognize the experience of Generation Z employees in the field of remote work and to identify factors that, in the opinion of representatives of generation Z, favor or limit the effectiveness of remote work in uncertain time of SARS-CoV-2.

2. Methods and characteristics of the research sample

For the purposes of this article the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1. What actions did the employer take in connection with the need for employees to switch to the remote work mode forced by the Covid-19 pandemic?
- RQ 2. Which factors favored and which hindered the performance of remote work?
- RQ 3. What key factors restrict young employees from returning to work at the company's premises?
- RQ 4. In which of the analyzed issues regarding remote work carried out by representatives of Generation Z, their responses proved most consistent?

The presented goal and research questions implied the need to select appropriate methods, techniques and research tools. For the purposes of this article, an empirical, quantitative research method was used, which was a diagnostic survey using the surveying technique. The research tool was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was accomplished using CAWI methodology. It was filled in by 334 respondents who represent Generation Z, are professionally active and who worked remotely during the pandemic. As many as 310 questionnaires were selected for the final analysis ($n = 310$). Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Data shown in the article is based on the responses/declarations of the surveyed. The questionnaire contained closed questions in the form of a disjunctive cafeteria. The survey ended with a metric that enabled carrying out a socio-demographic characteristics of the studied population. Then, as part of the adopted research methodology, the two-way data analysis method was used. Due to the nominal nature of the variables, frequency and percentage statistics were applied in the statistical evaluation. In addition, as part of the conducted research, hierarchical method was applied for cluster analysis, which allowed to group the most frequently combined (consistent) responses of respondents regarding the analyzed topic. For graphical presentation of results, dendrograms were used as an output from hierarchical clustering to show the hierarchical relationship between the analyzed responses. A total of 310 people participated in the study, of which 71.6% were women. Every third of the representatives of the youngest generation works in the service sector (32.9%). Most of the surveyed people live in a large city (61.3%) and in majority 88.4% they do not have children (Table 1).

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics pertaining to the research sample

		n	%
Gender	Female	222	71.6
	Male	88	28.4
Business sector	Commerce	20	6.5
	Production	26	8.4
	IT	38	12.3
	Service	102	32.9
	Education	14	4.5
	Medicine	12	3.9
	Other	98	31.6
Residence	Country	54	17.4
	Small town (population below 20 k)	30	9.7
	Mid-size town (population between 20 k - 100 k)	36	11.6
	Big city (population over 100 k)	190	61.3
Children	Yes	36	11.6
	No	274	88.4

Source: own work based on conducted research.

The results of the research presented in this paper come from pilot research that will be carried out as part of a research project aimed at recognizing generational patterns of remote work.

3. Results

The first question addressed to the respondents concerned the recognition of employees' opinions regarding the actions taken by the employer in relation to the pandemic.

More than a half of the surveyed admitted that the industry they work for was directly affected by Covid-19 restrictions (56.8%). Nevertheless, nearly 3/4 of respondents said that the employer did not decide to reduce headcount (72.9%) or create new jobs (78.7%). Nearly 2/3 of the respondents declared that the company they worked for was prepared to switch to remote work mode (65.8%) and what is more, quickly implemented solutions to start it (83.2%). Due to the change in the mode of work, the majority of respondents admitted that the employer provided appropriate material working environment enabling them to work remotely (67.1%). The employer also kept the employees informed about the situation in the company (69.1%). Apart from the above positive actions taken by the employer, the respondents also paid attention to the negative aspects. Only less than 40% of them admitted that the employer provided employees with social support during the lockdown (38.7%), made attempts to integrate people working remotely (36.8%) or encouraged them to undertake physical activity (34.8%). Only every fourth participant of the survey confirmed that the employer adjusted the benefits package to the pandemic situation (23.2%).

The analysis of the obtained responses with the use of the hierarchical clusters analysis methodology showed that the most consistent responses concerned the situation in which a company, which relatively quickly implemented remote work, was at the same time most often prepared for it, providing employees with the necessary means and tools (Figure 1).

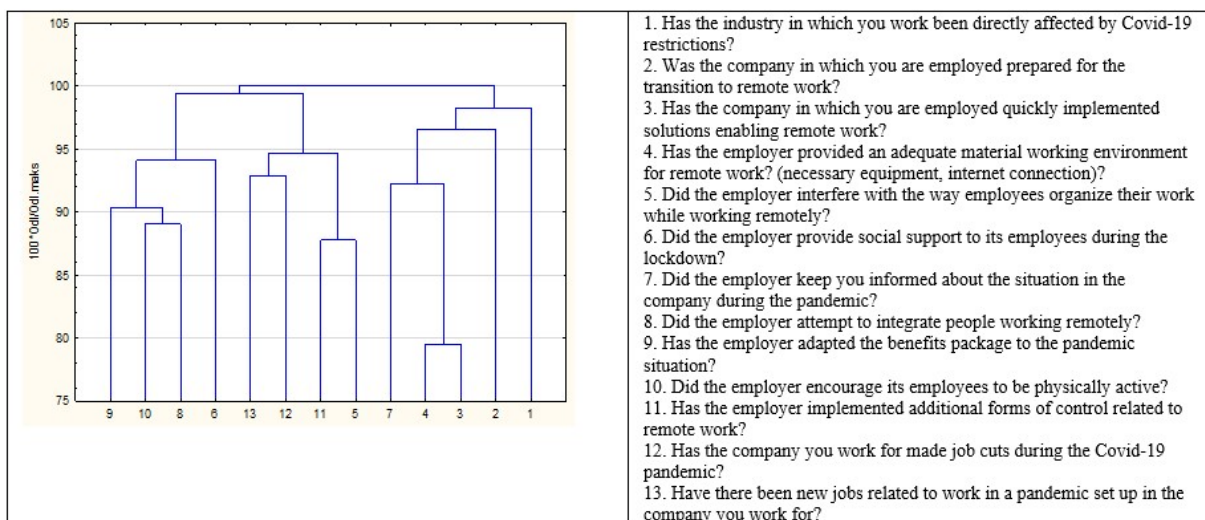


Figure 1. Hierarchical analysis of clusters for questions about actions taken by the employer in response to the pandemic. Source: own work based on conducted research.

Another issue raised in the research was the identification of activities and behaviours undertaken by employers and employees in connection with their swap to the remote work mode. The 18 statements/questions were verified for this purpose. The most relevant are

discussed below. It is worth emphasizing that remote work was not the first job for the vast majority of respondents (85.2%). Despite the fact that the direct superior did not ask about their well-being during the lockdown on an ongoing basis, the young people did not feel much stress about it (75.3%) and were not afraid of being laid off (80.6%). In the opinion of every third respondent, their commitment during the period of remote work increased (36.6%). A similar percentage of respondents, however, believe that their commitment has decreased (35.1%), which was reflected in the decrease in work efficiency as indicated by every fourth respondent (24.8%). The vast majority of respondents declared that the efficiency of their work did not decrease, but remained at the same level or increased (75.2%). Such an effect may result firstly from large freedom in terms of the way of organizing the work performed (83.1%), secondly from the lack of children and the related family obligations (63.0%) as well as less household duties (62.1%). This possibility of flexible work organization and the lack of an ongoing control meant that the youngest employees even admitted to be able to settle their private matters in the declared working time (72.1%), which fits into the characteristics of generation Z and seems to be their natural need.

The analysis of the obtained results with the use of the hierarchical cluster analysis methodology shows that the most consistent responses concerned the situation when the switching to remote working mode accompanied by greater control exercised by the employer /superior resulted with attempts to look for ways to circumvent this control on the part of the employees (Figure 2).

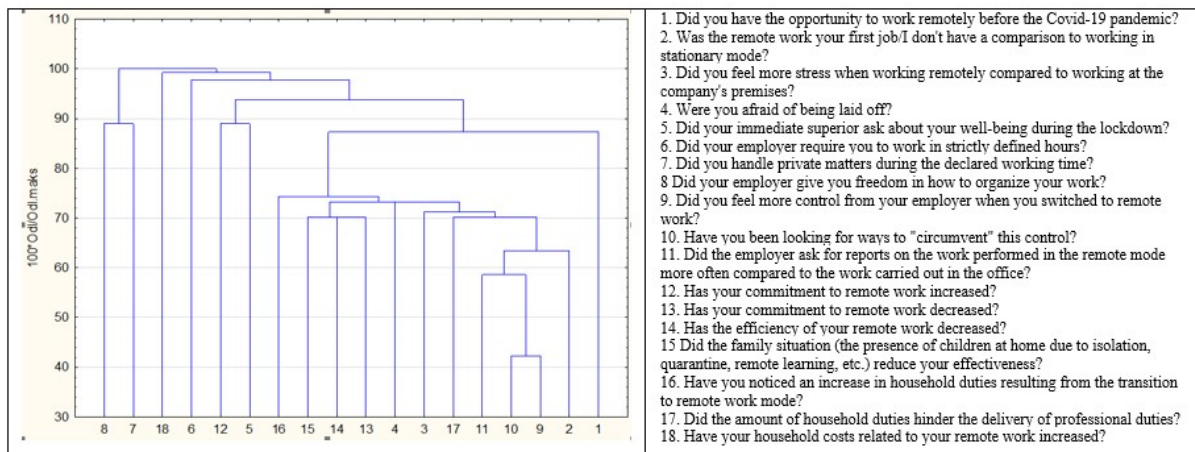


Figure 2. Hierarchical analysis of clusters for questions about the activities and behaviours undertaken by employers and employees in connection with their swap to the remote work mode. Source: own work based on conducted research.

Additionally, in the above-mentioned situations the employer asked for reports on the work performed more often compared to the time when work was carried out at the company's premises. Subsequently, it can be concluded that people who responded as above faced the remote work mode for the first time.

The next issues analyzed concerned the respondents' indications of the advantages and disadvantages related to remote work. The analysis of the obtained results shows that young employees perceive such a mode of work primarily from the perspective of advantages. As many as ten out of twelve potential advantages verified were indicated by more than a half of the respondents. Young employees most often pointed to: savings in commuting time (96.1%), the ability to work from any place (87.7%), spending more time at home (86.5%), the ability to reconcile various activities - work, home and family (87.7%) and greater freedom and independence at work (74.8%). Only slightly lower percentages of indications concerned such advantages of remote work as: cost savings (63.2%), no distracting colleagues (61.3%), the ability to decide flexibly on working hours (58.1%), the development of IT competences (58.1%) or the opportunity to test various applications designed for remote work (51.6%).

The analysis of the obtained results with the use of the hierarchical cluster analysis methodology shows that the most consistent responses concerned a situation in which the respondents had the opportunity to test various applications designed for remote work, while developing their IT competences (Figure 3). Another consistency concerned the response to saving the commuting time combined with the ability to work from any place, which in turn allowed employees to spend more time at home.

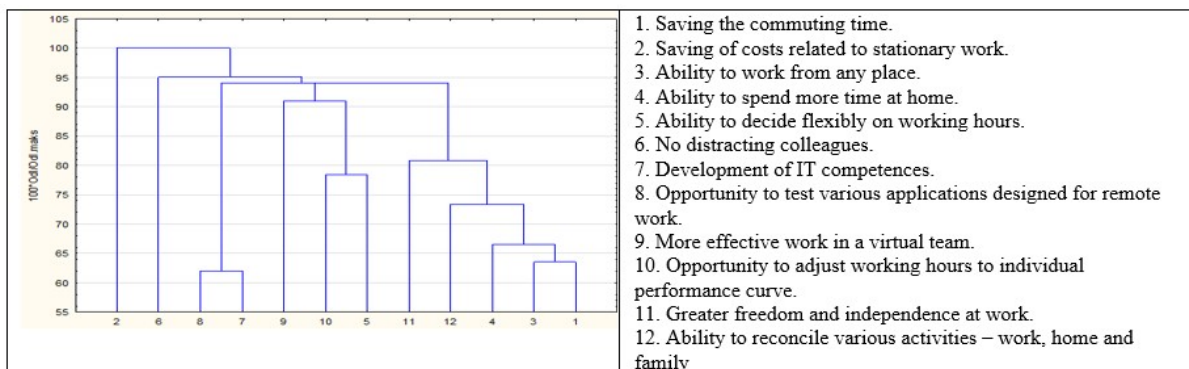


Figure 3. Hierarchical analysis of clusters for statements concerning advantages of remote work. Source: own work based on conducted research.

As regards declarations of respondents concerning disadvantages of remote work, it is worth emphasizing that as in the case of advantages more than a half of responses concerned just four disadvantages. These were: spending too much time in front of a computer screen (76.8%), less opportunities to receive ongoing support from co-workers raised by the youngest employees (65.8%), instability of the internet connection (59.4%) and unforeseen distractors (55.5%). The need to perform additional professional tasks after working hours (27.1%) and excessive contact from the employer regarding professional topics (23.9%) were declared as disadvantages of remote work by only every fourth respondent. It is worth noting that Z generation employees generally do not perceive the implementation of new technologies as a disadvantage, only a few (12.3%) considered it so (Table 2).

Table 2.*Descriptive statistics pertaining to disadvantages of remote work [%]*

Potential disadvantages	yes	no
Spending too much time in front of a computer screen	76.8	23.2
Less opportunities to receive ongoing support from co-workers	65.8	34.2
Instability of internet connection	59.4	40.6
Unforeseen distractors (e.g., kids, pets, redecorations)	55.5	44.5
Difficulties in managing own time	44.5	55.5
Lack of free space in the apartment / house allowing for undisturbed work	42.6	57.4
Difficulties in reconciling work with domestic and family responsibilities	39.4	60.6
Lack of necessary tools for work	37.4	62.6
Unexpected switching on the camera, microphone	32.9	67.1
The need to conduct meetings with the camera on	32.3	67.7
Unplanned commissioning of additional professional tasks after working hours	27.1	72.9
Excessive contact on the part of the employer regarding professional topics	23.9	76.1
No/poor knowledge of applications designed for remote work	12.3	87.7

Source: own work based on conducted research.

Based on the clusters analysis the most consistent responses concerned situations in which there was excessive contact from the employer regarding professional topics, which was often accompanied by commissioning of additional professional tasks after working hours (Figure 4). Another consistence identified in the collected responses concerned situations related to difficulties in managing one's own time, in particular reconciling professional work with home and family responsibilities.

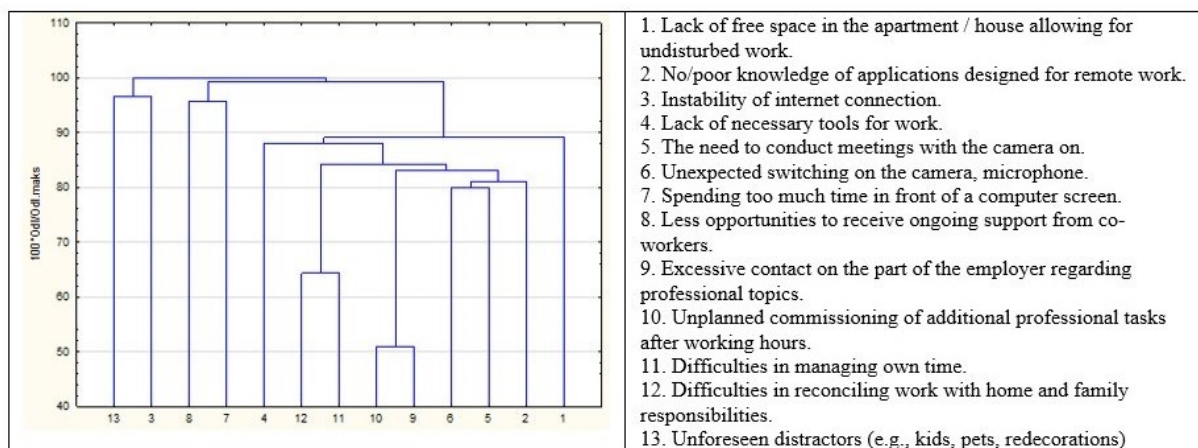


Figure 4. Hierarchical analysis of clusters for statements concerning disadvantages of remote work. Source: own work based on conducted research.

The last issue analyzed was the recognition of factors which make the respondents reluctant to return to stationary work at the company's premises (Table 3).

Table 3.

Descriptive statistics pertaining to factors which determine the reluctance to return to stationary work at the company's premises [%]

Factor	yes	no
Recognizing the many important advantages of remote work	92.3	7.7
Getting used to remote work	86.5	13.5
Reluctance to return to work at the company's premises after a longer period of remote work	83.9	16.1
The need to combine work and household duties	82.6	17.4
Concern for the health of loved ones	78.1	21.9
Concern about own health during a pandemic	74.2	25.8
Higher efficiency in remote work	60.0	40.0
General decrease in motivation and commitment to work	57.4	42.6

Source: own work based on conducted research.

It is worth emphasizing that all verified factors were indicated by respondents as significant restrictions on their return to stationary work. Half of the factors obtained over 80% of respondents' indications. These include: recognizing significant advantages of remote work (92.3%), getting used to this mode of work (86.5%), reluctance to work stationary after a longer period of remote work (83.9%) and the need to combine work and household duties (82.6%). As regards Table 3 the estimation error value was substantially high hence the decision to skip the hierarchical analysis.

4. Discussions

The interest in remote work has been systematically growing on the part of both employers and employees for several years. While many approached this form of work organization with reserve and even fear, the COVID-19 pandemic not only accelerated the already visible trend, that remote work and its associated technologies will be a transformative force for organizations over the long-term (Hadidi, Power, 2020) but also forced labor market entities to take up the related challenges. In this context, it seems particularly important to assess the experience related to remote work performed in uncertain time of SARS-CoV-2, both positive and negative especially on the part of Generation Z, i.e., the employees who are not only the youngest, but also the most acquainted with modern technologies. Referring to the research questions posed by the authors of the paper, in general the representatives of Generation Z positively assess actions taken by employers related to the transition of their subordinates to remote work. They appreciate their ability to quickly and at the same time multidimensionally adapt to the situation. In the opinion of young employees, the key factors supporting this process were the adaptation of the material side of work environment to new conditions, as well as the sharing ongoing information about the situation in the company. At the same time the youngest employees highlighted the lack of greater social support, integration and motivational activities from the employer at that time. Nevertheless, Generation Z employees felt neither stress nor

anxiety about the new mode of work. What's more, according to most of them, the efficiency of work performed in remote conditions remained at the same level and even increased. Thus, this fact not only confirms their positive experience of the transition to remote work, but also their openness and ease of adaptation to forms of work organization based on ICT technology. Another factor which in their opinion favors remote work was the relatively greater possibility of flexible organization of work and the lack of ongoing control by the supervisor. An important determinant influencing the positive assessment of remote work by the youngest employees was certainly their lower burden of family and household duties compared to older generations, and thus more free time at their disposal, which is part of their well-being. Another confirmation of the positive experience was a much greater number of advantages of remote work indicated by Generation Z respondents in comparison to disadvantages they observed. The most important advantages concerned savings in work related expenses and greater comfort in the case of "home office" work, especially due to a number of offered amenities of particular importance for Generation Z. In turn, what significantly hindered young employees from working remotely was, in their opinion, spending too much time in front of the computer screen and limited opportunities to receive support from co-workers, which is very desired in the case of people who are at the beginning of their professional career. The positive experience of people from Generation Z working remotely during the pandemic and the developed habit of such a mode of work have become an important reason for continuing this form of work organization rather than returning to work in the company's premises. As shown by the studies in the US, Generation Z employees find remote working more challenging overall. More than any other generation, Z'ers feel as if remote work had negative affect on their work-life balance. They also feel that their employer needs to provide them with better tools to work remotely, and that remote work has been somewhat imposed on their lives. More than any other generation, Z'ers want their managers to be well informed and empathetic to the challenges faced by those they are leading. Z'ers feel most skeptical toward their company and management paying close attention to how their company treats the people that have been laid off. That is why leaders today are facing an unprecedented, challenging situation: how to understand, lead, manage, and motivate Generation Z remotely. Stay-at-home measures have never happened before and are creating new challenges for leaders in organizations of every size and industry (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2020).

5. Summary

We have been operating in the VUCA reality for some time. After two years of uncertainty and the need to quickly adapt to the new pandemic situation, work processes have changed significantly. There was a noticeable proliferation of remote work, and the situation required

employers to react immediately, to solve emerging problems and to develop methods that would work in an unpredictable environment. There was not enough time to verify the new solutions. Many companies have been waiting for legal regulations in the field of remote work, so as to be able to effectively support their employees. This difficult experience is now a source of new knowledge. Both employers and employees are asking themselves: Which changes introduced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic will stay for longer and how will the further adaptation process to remote work move forward? Undoubtedly, remote work will stay with us for longer and after more or less successful experience, it will answer the needs of flexibility on the part of both employers and employees, especially the youngest employees of Generation Z. Currently, many companies have decided to return to stationary work, some have enabled employees to work in a hybrid form. For some employees, returning to the office is not a major problem, on the contrary – it is a return to the state of long-awaited normality, for others, however, the return to the office work model raises dissatisfaction and demotivates them. As the research has shown, young people like the model of remote work because they can derive many benefits from it. Representatives of Generation Z wonder whether the return to office work will deprive them of their privileges and make them submit to a certain discipline and rules applicable there. Therefore, the questions arise: How to convince an employee to return to stationary work after such a long period of remote work? How to maintain good remote work practices developed during the pandemic and improve solutions that have not worked?

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