

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MANAGEMENT. REMOTE WORK – NEW CHALLENGES FOR EMPLOYEES AND COMPANIES

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Purpose: The purpose of the article is to discuss issues related to remote work. The article is addressed to all persons who recently had to switch to remote work. Remote work is a novelty for many people. Just like every change, it often triggers adverse reactions, including fear, anxiety and reluctance. The article explores this type of work, presenting both its advantages and disadvantages. It summarises drawbacks and merits of remote work for both companies and individual employees. Moreover, it outlines challenges faced by companies and associated with the remote work system.

Design/methodology/approach: Literature research of the subject was carried out.

Findings: According to the data of OECD, we are currently one of the hardest working nations of Europe. However, this makes apparent the adverse trend related to remote work – a lot of overtime. This is a proof that many employees are unable to draw the line between their professional life and private life, with a significant harm to the latter. Therefore, the problem must be explored further. However, with a high degree of probability, where remote work proves to be effective, companies will combine remote and office work by deploying a hybrid work model. Such a solution is advantageous from both social – it is important for employees to experience team work and feel that they belong to a group – and well-being – isolation is often harmful for mental health – point of view.

Practical implications: A modern organisation, corporation or company is an entity that quickly and decidedly responds to changing market needs. Every employee must be able to use modern technologies. Such skills turned out to be a necessity to perform tasks and professional duties, since use of cutting-edge technologies is a foundation of remote work.

Originality/value: A holistic view on the issue of remote work from the perspective of employees for whom it is a novelty. Presentation of certain hazards associated with remote work along with its undeniable advantages for employees and employers.

Keywords: company management, remote work, pandemics, human factor.

Category of the paper: General review.

1. Introduction

Recently, many white-collar employees who previously worked in offices, schools, institutions or corporations had to face a radical change of conditions of performance of their professional work. In the face of pandemics, they had to stay home to limit spreading of the coronavirus. Therefore, many employees had to leave a common office or school space and create their own workplaces at home. Of course, such a workplace had to be equipped with appropriate office devices, in particular a PC with Internet access, phone, fax, photocopier, as well as many other devices necessary to perform remote work.

When executing work in a traditional, on-site form, employees up to this point tried to draw the line between professional work and private space, to “not bring their work home”, according to the rule “my home is my castle”.

Is it possible in case of remote work? How employees and employers dealt with this new situation? What consequences and challenges remote work brings about for both?

Searching for answers to the above questions, the authors of this article conducted research aimed at familiarizing themselves with the conditions of remote work. Attempting to present the discussed issue in a holistic perspective, they analyzed and described the perspective of both the employer and the employee. The article presents various definitions of the return: remote work. Its advantages and disadvantages are described, which reflect the sociological, organizational, technical and financial aspects. In the summary, the authors drew attention to the new challenges faced by employees. They are related both to the adaptation of the home environment to the performance of professional work, to the change in the manner of performing the entrusted professional duties in changing environmental conditions, and to the need to adopt new rules of working time management.

2. What is remote work

In the contemporary world, a modern organisation, corporation or company is an entity that quickly and decidedly responds to changing market needs. Every employee must be able to use modern technologies. Such skills turned out to be a necessity to perform tasks and professional duties, since use of cutting-edge technologies is a foundation of remote work.

The dynamic development of remote work is frequently an element that makes it difficult to create a clear-cut definition of the discussed issue; therefore, it is often not easy to grasp its essence since new elements are constantly being added to it.

Back in 1995 (the report by R. Blanpain), remote work was defined as “a work performed on behalf of an employer or a client, mainly in a place other than a traditional workplace, using IT techniques”. While in 2007, (Ciupa) it was presented as “a new form of system and performance of work, in which the nature, place and time of work, the method and conditions of its performance, the order and organization may be shaped by using advanced IT and communication technologies” (Felstead, Henseke, 2017; WFirma, 2022).

For this reason, we may assume that the notion of remote work does not relate only to the nature of work, but also the place of its performance. Another important element, which was already mentioned here, is the use of modern technologies and communication devices, which allow creation of a new space for relations between employees and employers.

Remote work is often also referred to as telework or e-work, because an employee, when using modern technologies to perform it, sends the work results to an employer via the Internet. Employees contact employers using electronic mail and various instant messengers. Therefore, in order to precisely define remote work, we must refer to the Labour Code, which accurately pinpoints the issue.

The Polish law defines telework in the Article 67(5) §2 of the Labour Code as follows: “A teleworker is a worker who performs work in conditions specified in §1 and submits the work results to their employer in particular via electronic communication means.”

On the other hand, the European Commission defines remote work as follows: “a method of organisation and performance of work, where an employee performs work outside the company that employs them for a certain part of their work time, and delivers the work results to their employer via IT and data transfer technologies, in particular via the Internet”. This definition highlights the organisational aspect of remote work, and also points to the fact that employees perform their duties outside their workplace.

After summarising all elements of the aforementioned descriptions of the discussed topic, we propose the following definition:

“Remote work (online work, flexible work, mobile work, telework or e-work) should be understood as a form of organisation of work accordant with the rules of a company, the employees of which do not perform work directly in the headquarters (department, branch or unit) of the employer, but rather via use of electronic communication means (PC, phone, Internet)” (Jeran, 2016; Oreg et al., 2011; Szluz, 2013).

However, it should be noted that, despite its current popularity, remote work will not be successful in every field. Telework is a good solution in case of employees who for most of the time analyse and process information. Results of their work do not require physical contact with an employer or are intangible. It is recommended mostly for representatives of so called independent professions, in particular: graphic designers, illustrators, copywriters, editors or translators. It is an excellent solution for young parents or persons taking care of elderly bedridden persons, who want or must work and look after children or elderly people at the same time.

Remote work may be regular or occasional. By the latter we understand emergency situations, e.g., when an employee must be home in a given day because they wait for an electrician, plumber etc. and their employer allows them to perform work from home on that day.

There is also a classification that considers the time for which an employee performs their duties remotely – according to this classification, e-work may be divided into:

- permanent – full time remote work,
- alternating – on certain days an employee works from home, and on other works in an office,
- supplementary – full time on-site work, in exceptional situations an employee takes work home and performs it remotely.

Due to the present coronavirus pandemic, most employees worked remotely for a certain period of time. The anti-crisis shield has introduced regulations related to remote work, which are currently regulated in the Act of 2 March 2020 on particular solutions related to prevention, counteracting and combating COVID-19, other contagious diseases and crisis situations caused by them (Łochnicka, 2015; Ślęzak, 2012; WFirma, 2022).

3. Advantages and disadvantages of remote work for employers

Remote work undoubtedly brings about many benefits for employers. But do they outweigh the disadvantages?

Among the benefits of remote work for employers, we may certainly point out the following (Bąk, 2006; Makowiec, Bober, 2008; Makowiec, Mikuła, 2014; Sikora, 2012; WFirma, 2022):

- significantly lower cost of functioning of a company,
- reduction of costs associated with use of real estates and providing employees with workplaces featuring an own desk equipped with a PC (when some employees work outside the office/are on a leave or a sick leave, an employer must pay for an empty workstation), reduction of costs of furnishing and office equipment, as well as saving of the office space and use of consumables,
- lower employee costs – reduction of costs associated with onboarding of employees and trainings and the ability to employ workers from regions of lower level of wages; moreover, reduction of costs of maintenance and security staff,
- less overtime – remote employees are less likely to take a day off,
- significant reduction of employee rotation since the majority of employees prefer remote work,

- and, of course, the flexibility of remote work – this form allows to employ additional employees without any changes in arrangement of office spaces.

The disadvantages of remote work for employers include (Firnkes, 2022; Zalega, 2009):

- high starting costs – a significant amount of expenditure incurred in a short time due to costs associated with the need to purchase new equipment, required software, as well as fees for use of ITC connections,
- motivation of employees becomes more difficult – lack of full control which may translate into lower level of efficiency of employees in case of sporadic contact with them; it becomes much harder to create the sense of the company's main goal, making financial motivation the main and sometimes even the only form of inducement,
- it is harder to protect data during remote work – information related to operations of a company do not stay inside the company, but are rather sent to an employee's home and back; therefore, there is a risk that information may leak during the communication process, and as a result fall into hands of competition or unauthorized persons,
- it is more difficult to settle the efficient work time – due to this, employees are usually paid for the effects of their work, and not the time spent on performing it; however, there are types of work where this form of settlement is not always applicable,
- it is more difficult to create specific standards, increasing the time needed to achieve the company's goals,
- long and frequent conversations, the costs of which are borne by an employer, which may sometimes significantly increase the cost of employment of an employee,
- lack of commitment and sluggishness, which also reduce the potential of employees, and thus their efficiency.

4. Advantages and disadvantages of remote work for employees

Remote work has a lot of advantages – for this reason it is liked and preferred by many employees. But are employees also aware of its disadvantages?

Among the benefits of remote work for employees, we may certainly point out the following:

- huge saving of time associated with preparation and journey to a workplace,
- a significant freedom in terms of selection of a place of work for an employee – if they have appropriate devices, employees may work in a park, in a garden, by a lake etc.,
- moreover, they often have freedom in terms of the time of completion of a task, provided they observe the deadlines indicated by their employer – an employee may plan the time of completion of a task according to their capabilities and needs,

- significantly greater job satisfaction and more honest assessment of an employee's work – an employee's look, contacts or acquaintances at work, as well as their working style, are insignificant – only the actual results of their work matter,
- global possibilities for greater development – significantly greater possibilities of acquiring new employers or clients,
- limitation or elimination of negative aspects of the corporate culture, including constant competition, so called “rat race”,
- mental comfort – work in a pleasant and calm atmosphere (you may work while listening to your favourite music and not disturb your colleagues), no constant supervision and stressful control by your employer,
- more efficient work – of course, given that it is well organised and an employee has good internal discipline,

The disadvantages of remote work for employees include:

- lack of possibility of actual integration with other team members necessary for mental well-being of many employees,
- it is difficult to draw the line between work and leisure time – there are many things in your house that may distract you – this change of a lifestyle is often mentioned as the greatest disadvantage of remote work since for many employees the line between their professional and private life becomes “blurred”,
- asynchronous communication – often long response times when we need information to be able to continue work “immediately”,
- isolation and feeling of loneliness of remote workers – no contact with colleagues, no traditional conversations over a cup of coffee – in case of some employees, this causes adverse mental reactions (they often feel that they are on their own, have no support or feel isolated from their work team),
- limited promotion possibilities in certain cases – many remote workers, when working outside the office, are unable to show their accomplishments, are being unnoticed or are unable to influence others (at least to a degree that would be possible during work in a traditional office),
- possible stress within your family – working from home may increase the stress level of an employee or their remaining family members, e.g., due to the necessity to remain silent, or disturb the family life due to its disorganisation,
- in certain cases – stagnation caused by lack of actual affiliation with a company.

Currently, more and more employees declare that they want to work from home. The popularity of remote work increases. It gives large and still new possibilities to develop in the Internet, as well as allows to hold meetings online. According to a research in Poland, every third person will probably select this form of work (Brosix, 2019; BSJP, 2020; E-pasje, 2022; Firnkes, 2022; Kantar TNS, 2018; Wyrzykowska, 2014).

5. Remote work and its challenges for an employee

As presented above, the popularity of remote work among employees keeps growing; therefore, we should also point out the challenges it creates for every employee.

Below, we present selected challenges of remote work for employees (Felstead, Henseke, 2017; Kamińska, Tokarsk, 2016, Lorenz, 2011; Sęczkowska, 2019):

- professional accountability: Can you focus and do you know that you can focus on independent manner of work. If not – if you need someone by your side, someone who would constantly indicate subsequent work steps and give you tasks – such a form of work will be a real challenge for you;
- career development: As a remote worker, are you sufficiently “noticed” by your boss or employer? Can you live without conversations on topics that are not directly related to your work? If you want to dynamically develop your career or have ambitious professional plans, this may cause problems;
- delegation of power and responsibilities: Are you able to efficiently deal with professional matters, including delegation of power, authorisations or responsibilities to particular employees via a phone, chat or e-mail?;
- professional infrastructure: Do you own necessary tools and have space in your apartment for a home office? Do you have appropriate working conditions, e.g., silence?;
- organizational culture: Do your colleagues and supervisors have any experience in collaboration with remote workers? Can you use their ideas and advice to improve the quality of your remote work?;
- financial conditions: Did you establish who will cover additional costs associated with having a home office? Is it accounted for in your remuneration?;
- the need for direct contact between colleagues: Do you feel the need to create close relations in your working environment? Is remote contact with your colleagues sufficient for you? Or maybe you need to maintain direct relations with other employees to stay in good mental health?;
- the necessity to draw the line between professional and private life: Are you able to draw the line between private and professional life? It is difficult when your work remotely, and when it becomes impossible, it is a huge problem.

Practical implications related to remote workers (Aguenza, Som, 2012; Baron-Polańczyk, Klementowska, 2018; Dolot, 2020; Sikora, 2012; Zieliński, 2016):

- you work from home: However, when you work remotely, you should not feel “too comfortable” and work, e.g., on a sofa, which is associated with leisure time rather than work. Feeling “good” is enough;

- video and other meetings or conferences allow insight into your private life; therefore, you should indicate a separate working area in your home;
- professional communication channels: If you can, try to separate your communication channels into professional and private ones, e.g., do not use your personal computer or smartphone for professional communication;
- work time: Establish your working hours with your employer, as well as the time of your availability and the time you are logged in. Or maybe it is not important for your employer and you may perform work in hours that are suitable for you? If so, do not forget to do your work! For many employees, a great practice is to perform work in established hours.

6. Remote work and its challenges for companies

Despite the high popularity of remote work, it is not simple, particularly at the beginning. It may also end with a failure if a company or employees are not ready for such a form of work (Antal, 2020; E-pasje, 2022; Firnkes, 2022; Łodyga, 2007):

- often, keeping in touch with your colleagues working in office proves to be challenging: Employees should feel integrated with the team. In practice, it is not that simple, since they do not contact each other personally every day. Therefore, supervisors should show good leadership skills and trust their employees.
- professional and social integration of employees: The employer should regularly organise meetings or team events, if possible. They favour team integration, which is so important for certain employees who value direct contact with others. Moreover, sometimes it is easier to discuss certain misunderstandings or uncertainties that emerged during remote work through face-to-face conversation.
- infrastructure: You should precisely establish the techniques and tools that will be necessary in the future to ensure that cooperation is efficient. Starting from video-conference systems to working time recording, if needed. Information circulation is very important here.
- important issues related to remote work: Companies should specify in writing important points related to cooperation with persons working remotely. These may include issues such as rights, responsibilities, working hours, but also very important matters associated with data protection and access to data of the company's clients.

7. Work efficiency of an employee working remotely

Are remote workers less efficient? Many companies ask themselves these questions. But can they be answered unambiguously?

Many companies refuse to allow remote work, since this means losing control over employees compared to work on-site, e.g., in an office. Many employers still think that remote work equals procrastination.

On the other hand, according to many researches related to remote work, remote workers use their time significantly more efficiently compared to employees working on-site. Very often, employees spend much more time on efficient work at home – e.g., they decide to dedicate an additional evening to continue working on a project or contract that is important to their company.

In practice, the truth probably lies somewhere in between.

At home, an employee may be tempted by many issues unrelated to professional work – walking their dog out, work in a garden, urgent cleaning or shopping – there is nothing wrong about that, but you should remember that such activities should be done during breaks in work.

On the other hand, an employee is not distracted by their colleagues – this argument should not be underestimated. Also in case of on-site work, during various meetings and conferences, at some point a substantive discussion may switch to private matters, thus prolonging the discussion, making the participants lose the thread, and forcing them to start over – everyone has been there. Often, endless “brainstorms” in an office do not bring about anything new. A remote worker is able to indicate a safe and comfort working zone, in which they will not be distracted by other people.

Therefore, the question of whether employees are more efficient at home or in an office is often not the most important one. What is important is whether employees are motivated or not – regardless of where they work. Escape and “chilling out” is also possible when working on-site. Appropriate inducement of employees is a very important issue associated with an organisational culture of a given company that must be developed using high standards – if that happens, positive results will come very quickly (ILO, 2020; Solo-Kolos Sp. z o.o., 2020; Szymczyk, 2022; Piątkowski, 2011).

Summary

What is the future of remote work? According to the data of OECD, we are currently one of the hardest working nations of Europe. In 2019, Poles spent on average 1806 hours on execution of professional duties. Other nations, such as Norwegians, Danes or Germans,

even more than 400 hours less. This makes apparent the adverse trend related to remote work – a lot of overtime. This is a proof that many employees are unable to draw the line between their professional life and private life, with a significant harm to the latter.

However, with a high degree of probability, where remote work proves to be effective, companies will combine remote and office work by deploying a hybrid work model.

Such a solution is advantageous from both social – it is important for employees to experience team work and feel that they belong to a group – and well-being – isolation is often harmful for mental health – point of view.

The conducted research identified new challenges that were set for employees. They take the form of: adapting the space of the home environment to the performance of professional work, changing the manner of performing the entrusted professional duties or implementing new rules of working time management. Each of the above-mentioned challenges may constitute the direction of further scientific research in the area under consideration.

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