WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES IN A HYBRID WORKPLACE

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Purpose: This paper aims to explore the perception of well-being in in -office work and hybrid work and to identify new tasks facing HR due to that form of work and it's connection with employees well-being.

Design/methodology/approach: Qualitative research was carried out in the form of semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews. The target group consisted of representatives of managerial positions.

Findings: The hybrid work system has a significant impact on the well-being of employees. Physical well-being issues are not properly taken care of during home office. The impact on mental and social well-being is not clear. This link should be further investigated.

Research limitations/implications: The deliberately selected and small sample with the predominance of large organizations are limitations to the research. The next step of research should include a larger sample and a quantitative method.

Practical implications: New HR tasks and competencies in the face of hybrid work have been identified which may serve as benchmarks to other institutions. What's more, practical examples of initiatives enhancing well-being have been presented, and aspects concerning physical, psychological, and social well-being in a hybrid workplace.

Social implications: The article emphasizes the importance of implementing well-being initiatives that contribute to social responsibility and have significant social impacts on employees and their families.

Originality/value: The paper contributes to filling the research gap on employee well-being in a hybrid work environment. It is addressed to both researchers and managers of organizations, serving as a benchmark for their initiatives.

Keywords: employee well-being, hybrid organization, SHRM, sustainable human resource management

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The hybrid work model was initiated in many organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic by forcing a shift to remote work to maintain safety and social distancing guidelines (Gupta et al., 2020). It turned out to be beneficial for both employees and employers, which

resulted in an increase in interest in the hybrid model also after the pandemic (Murphy, 2021; Twardowska, 2016). Still, the real impact of this type of work on employee satisfaction and overall well-being remains an important research topic (Rožman et al., 2021; Wierzchowska, 2021). Attitudes towards hybrid work have changed over time – from high enthusiasm at the beginning to moderate optimism or negation today. The impact of remote work on employee efficiency is also not unambiguous – it can be presumed that it depends on many factors: the specifics of the job, the characteristics of the employee, having or not having a family, and others. However, problems with time and task management and so-called "always-on" life have been reported (Risi, Pronzato, 2021).

The issue of employee well-being within a hybrid organization has already gained interest among researchers providing contrary results showing complex and unclear impact of hybrid work systems on employees' health and well-being (Dale et al., 2024). The time distribution of previous research was also limited due to the fact that changes to the hybrid work model were introduced within last few years. Small research samples, cultural context depending on geographical territory and industry were also factors that made it unable to generalize results. Thus, the topic is still theoretically underexplored and at the same time very important which creates a research gap worth investigating. Thus this paper aims to discuss the well-being of employees in a hybrid work system through presenting results of research conducted on a group of Polish managers.

2. Literature review

Care for employees is one of the pillars of sustainable human resources management (SHRM). The beginnings of SHRM date back to around 2000, when researchers began to notice the role of sustainable development in managing people in an organization, and interest in it has been gradually growing over the years, as evidenced by, m.in the increasing number of scientific publications (Faisal, 2023). SHRM combines economic, ecological, and social perspectives (Pabian, 2015) and is necessary to achieve sustainable organization (Ricardo de Souza Freitas et al., 2011).

Focusing more attention on areas associated with broadly understood sustainability is also caused by reporting in the field of ESG (environmental, social, governance), i.e. activities related to the natural environment, social impact, and corporate governance. Consumers and investors are increasingly interested in assessing companies according to ESG principles, which causes increasing pressure to report this area in reports (Gołębiewski, 2023). Social responsibility is more and more important for employees (Jakubczak, Gotowska, 2015) and other stakeholders. However, it should be noted that employees present different attitudes toward the sustainability agenda (Podgorodnichenko et al., 2020).

The concept of employee well-being, introduced into management science by Seligman, has been gaining importance in recent years (Goodman et al., 2018; Seligman, 2012). For a long time, managers no longer think of a person in an organization as a resource that is used, but as a capital in which one invests (van Marrewijk, Timmers, 2003). The concept of talent management, especially in the inclusive sense, also appreciates the distinguishing competencies that support the overall effectiveness of the organization (Lewis, Heckman, 2006). Well-being and sustainable HRM are associated (Abdelmotaleb, Saha, 2020; Celma et al., 2018; Chia, Kern, 2021) but the area is still underexplored (Qamar et al., 2023).

Another factor contributing to the increased interest in well-being in European countries is the falling unemployment rate and difficulties in recruiting qualified workers (Astrov et al., 2021; Cerna, Czaika, 2016; Poór et al., 2021). The skills gap in many organizations and the talent shortage are prompting organizations to take more care of employees already hired (Whysall et al., 2019). Such an attitude is also a magnet for new candidates, supporting the image of a good employer and employer of choice (Benraïss-Noailles, Viot, 2021).

As it was stated above, introducing remote working on a large scale had been at first associated with many potential benefits for well-being, such as improved sleep and nutrition, increased leisure time and physical activity, and thus reduced fatigue. Contrary to those, it proved out to bring also negative emotions such as loneliness and isolation, poor health outcomes resulting from excessive screen time and long working hours (Dale et al., 2024).

3. Methodology of research

The presented results are part of a bigger research conducted by a research team from the Institute of Management at the SGH Warsaw School of Economics led by Marta Ziółkowska, PhD. The research aimed to identify areas that pose the biggest challenges for organizations in terms of gradually adapting to the requirements and conditions of hybrid work.

The author of the text was responsible for the area of employee well-being and HR departments. The remaining parts concerned strategic aspects, the impact of hybrid work on the structure and organizational culture, creating creative spaces, data security, communication, and organizational processes.

The data collection procedure consisted of conducting 15 semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews, transcribing their recordings, and then checking whether their automatic transcription caused any transformations by comparing the recordings with the text. The interviews were conducted between July and August 2023 and then anonymized.

The data obtained were analyzed using MAXQDA 2020.

The research questions posed in the research were as follows:

1. What employee well-being activities do organizations carry out?
2. What are the differences in well-being during hybrid work between a group of online and in-office employees?
3. What new tasks do organizations set for HR departments in connection with the transition to a hybrid model and what new competencies are required of HR professionals as a result?

The research sample consisted of 15 respondents in managerial positions: directors, managers, presidents, owners, and leaders. The majority of respondents were women, while the rest were men. More than a half of the surveyed organizations were already using remote work before the pandemic, while the rest of the organizations did not have such a system in place. The surveyed organizations represented various industries, including pharmaceuticals, food, transport, media, and marketing. In terms of size, large companies prevailed, followed by medium companies, one small and one startup. In terms of the origin of the initial capital, almost half of the companies were foreign and Polish. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the research sample

	Respondent		Company			
No.	Management level	Gender (F/M)	Organizing remote work before the pandemic	Industry	Size	Origin of the initial capital
1.	Manager	F	Yes	Waste processing (chemical)	Start-up	Foreign
2.	Director	F	Yes	Activities of sports facilities	Large	Polish
3.	President	M	Yes	Business environment institution	Small	Polish
4.	Director	M	Yes	Household appliances	Large	Foreign
5.	Director	F	Yes	Marketing agency	Medium	Polish
6.	Director	F	Yes	Pharmaceutical	Large	Foreign
7.	Manager	M	Yes	Energy	Large	Foreign
8.	Director	M	Yes	Digital logistics	Large	Foreign
9.	Manager	F	No	Media	Large	Polish
10.	Director	M	No	Pharmaceutical	Medium	Polish
11.	Owner	F	No	Transport	Medium	Polish
12.	Director	F	No	Pharmaceutical	Large	Foreign
13.	Leader	M	No	Food processing	Large	Foreign
14.	Manager	F	Yes	Pharmaceutical	Large	Polish
15.	Manager	F	Yes	Gastronomy	Large	Foreign

Source: author's own.

4. Research results

4.1.   Activities towards enhancing well-being

In response to the first research question „What employee well-being activities do organizations carry out?" it was found that most of the surveyed organizations conduct numerous activities in this area. The range of initiatives aimed at caring for the well-being of employees is very wide and diverse. However, among the surveyed companies were organizations that do not carry out formal activities in the field of employee well-being.

Physical well-being measures include the promotion of physical activity, physical health consultations, the provision of food to employees, shorter working hours on Fridays, a convenient office location, care for work safety, and flexible working hours. The surveyed companies also offer standard non-wage benefits packages to their employees, including sports cards, and cafeteria systems where the collected points can be exchanged for tickets to cultural events or specific products, medical care, and life insurance.

Care for the psychological well-being of employees is also visible, which is manifested in providing employees with consultations with a psychologist, organizing training courses emphasizing the importance of employee well-being, surveying employee satisfaction and needs, anti-mobbing and anti-discrimination practices, and building trust in employees.

Undoubtedly, what was happening was that managers were more sensitive to checking whether employees a) understood the tasks, b) felt that they had the means to complete the tasks, in fact, they felt ok, right? So a bit of increased vigilance on the part of managers or their teams feel this well-being to some extent, so that's for sure (respondent 9).

As part of building social well-being, respondents mentioned integration initiatives for employees, including joint breakfasts, initiatives dedicated to celebrating the organization's successes together, as well as campaigns referring to special days, such as Fat Thursday, Children's Day, or Halloween. Internal communication channels, through which employees can talk about private interests and passions, also help to create social bonds.

Among the surveyed organizations, it is also common for management board members to talk to employees, and to appoint separate positions and working groups for well-being.

4.2.   Challenges with maintaining well-being in hybrid organizations

The answer to the second research question "What are the differences in well-being during hybrid work between a group of online and in-office employees?" resulted in a list of aspects that are challenges for the surveyed organizations. Those aspects were analysed and presented in Table 2 divided into three categories: concerning physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Table 2.

Aspects of physical, psychological and social well-being in hybrid organizations

Physical well-being	Psychological well-being	Social well-being
Ergonomic adaptation of the home workstation	Lack of comfortable mental conditions for working from home	Limited contact with colleagues is a disadvantage (for some employees) and an advantage (for others)
Ergonomics in the office	Unjustified need to come to the office	Ease of interaction and building relationships in stationary work
Improved hygiene of work in the office	Lack of work-life balance	Benefits available only in the office
Lunch break at the office	Defined freedom to choose the work operating mode	Training is available only for employees coming into the office
The proper infrastructure and tools for your hybrid workforce	Remote workplace flexibility	Team-building events conducted in a hybrid form
A more comfortable working environment at home	Easier preparation for meetings in remote work	
Too much office load on certain days	Multitasking made it easy for remote work	

Source: author's own.

The main differences in physical well-being between employees working remotely and those working from the office include higher occupational hygiene in the office. This hygiene is related not only to an ergonomic workstation, which is more difficult to organize at home, especially since the employer does not always provide adequate equipment for a home workplace but also to aspects such as a lunch break, which is more often used by employees present in the office.

> *We often hear that if someone sits at home in the morning sometimes and really does a lot of work, they finish work without a meal or one glass of water, or they forget so much in this work that they do not see when 5.5 or 6 hours of this working day have passed* (respondent 2).

However, it happens that working conditions at home are rated as more comfortable than working conditions in the office, due to the smaller number of people around the workstation and the possibility of deeper concentration.

With a hybrid work organization, it may also happen that most employees will choose the same days of the week to visit the office, which may result in too much office occupancy and a lack of space to hold meetings in conference rooms.

> *Most employees choose Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday, which means that the office is overcrowded on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, which means that (...) there are no conference rooms available and sometimes there is really nowhere to hold a meeting* (respondent 12).

The aspects of mental and social well-being that work in favor of remote workers include limited contact with colleagues allowing for greater emotional stability of employees, work-life balance, easier multitasking, easier preparation for meetings, and flexibility in choosing the place of remote work, as well as the choice of the mode in which you would like to work on a given day.

On the other hand, it is easier to initiate interactions and exchange of ideas between employees and to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders while working in a stationary mode. Aspects that reduce the well-being of remote workers compared to those working from the office are also highlighted. These include limited contact between remote employees and colleagues, the inability to take advantage of non-wage benefits, such as training available only in the office, the lack of comfortable mental conditions for working from home (resulting, for example, from the presence of children or other family members working remotely at home), and the lack of work-life balance.

> *Everyone caught themselves working more from home than an office because the place of work and rest was the same and it was very easy to lose the line between one and the other. Normally, you leave the office and that's the end. (...). When you sit and work from home, the line is completely blurred and it turns out that you finished work two hours later, not paying attention to the fact that it was two hours later* (respondent 8).

However, this does not mean that stationary work does not hurt the well-being of employees. According to the respondents, the need to come to the office on certain days can be unjustified – for example, an employee comes to the office only to spend the day in online meetings with team members located in other countries. In addition, in the current economic situation, employees often face an increase in the cost of commuting to the office, which makes them reluctant to work in a stationary form.

4.3. New competencies and tasks required by a hybrid work system

As regards the answer to the third research question: "What new tasks do organizations set for HR departments in connection with the transition to a hybrid model and what new competencies are required of HR professionals as a result?" – respondents admit that there are many such novelties. They are presented in Table 3 broken down by area.

Table 3.
New HR tasks and competencies in the face of hybrid work

HR Process	New tasks and competencies required
Recruitment	- Ability to recruit employees remotely - Ability to onboard employees remotely and in a hybrid mode - Communicating the rules of work to candidates in a clear way - Adaptation of the workplace to the needs of employees - Adaptation of contracts to hybrid work organization
Organization of work	- Adaptation of internal regulations to remote work - Support in the organization of hybrid work - Exchange of best practices between organizations
Well-being	- Care for the well-being of employees - Ability to show trust in employees - Ability to recognize emotions - Care for building bonds between employees and the organization - Ability to integrate employees
Development	- Efficient and engaging organization of training - Knowledge of e-learning tools and platforms

Cont. table 3.

Personal abilities	- Organization of own work and self-discipline
	- Communication skills
	- Resistance to stress
	- Managing a hybrid team
	- Verification of the work of remote/hybrid employees

Source: author's own.

Among the competencies expected from HR departments in the situation of the spread of hybrid work, the ability to conduct recruitment processes remotely and to introduce new employees to their duties in a remote or hybrid form is mentioned.

Managers also expect HR departments to support the organization of hybrid work and the efficient and engaging organization of training participants, to communicate the principles of hybrid work to candidates in a clear way, to adapt the workplace to the needs of employees, as well as to adapt internal regulations and contracts with employees to the specifics of partially remote work.

Soft skills such as the ability to read emotions in remote contact with employees, the ability to integrate employees, care for building bonds between employees and the organization and the well-being of employees, as well as the ability to show trust in them are also becoming important. Among the HR tasks expected in the conditions of a hybrid work organization, the exchange of best practices with other companies is also mentioned.

In the conditions of hybrid work, the organization of one's work and self-discipline become an extremely important competence of every employee. It is noted that important competencies of employees providing hybrid work are also:

- responsibility,
- communication skills,
- ability to work in a group,
- ability to manage projects,
- ability to conduct training involving remote employees,
- goal and result orientation and resistance to stress.

From the perspective of leaders managing teams, the ability to verify the work of remote and hybrid employees and the competent management of a dispersed team is also important.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The qualitative research conducted allowed for an in-depth look at the issues of employee well-being and the role of HR in organizations adopting a hybrid work model. The conclusions presented below contribute to filling the research gap in this area.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of hybrid work has changed significantly and permanently – it can be said that there is no way to return to the pre-pandemic state. This results in organizations having to adapt to the new conditions as the hybrid, flexible model is expected by employees (Diab-Bahman et al., 2020; Rožman et al., 2021).

Hybrid work has an impact on the physical, mental, and social well-being of employees. The physical well-being of remote workers is decreasing due to the lack of an ergonomic workplace at home, lack of access to infrastructure, and longer working hours. Those results are not in line with other research when hybrid work did not affect subjective well-being in terms of health (Juchnowicz, Kinowska, 2022).

The impact on mental and social well-being is not clear. Some employees feel a lack of contact and feel isolated from the events happening in the office (Juchnowicz, Kinowska, 2021), while there are employees for whom this form is suitable. Employees may experience both positive and negative effects on their subjective well-being (Dale et al., 2024). There are greater difficulties in integrating employees, organizing joint events, and establishing ties with the organization. Work-life balance is affected badly due to work from home (Benita, Ghayathri, 2020).

Hybrid work creates new tasks for HR departments, including, m.in, remote recruitment, adaptation to work, and support in the organization of hybrid work which supports the results of other research (Collings et al., 2021; Zaręba, 2021).

HR professionals and other employees must also acquire new competencies to work effectively in a hybrid mode, the most important of which is the organization of their work and self-discipline (Tabor-Błażewicz, 2022; Weritz et al., 2022). In dealing with online workers they should also provide new performance management and appraisal system as well as be trained to recognize mental health issues (Kniffin et al., 2020).

The following research limitations were diagnosed in the scope of the conducted analyses:

- sampling that prevents generalization of results to the population,
- limitation to the group of companies participating in the survey,
- limitation to a group of enterprises located in Poland.

The proposed directions of further research include continuing the analysis of the next years, taking into account social and legal changes, deepening the research by using quantitative research on a larger number of enterprises and extending it to international research.

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