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Research Challenges Concerning Employees Doing Enforced Remote Work

Wyzwania badawcze dotyczące pracowników w sytuacji wymuszonej pracy zdalnej

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify the research challenges faced by scientists and practitioners looking for effective solutions to address the behaviour of employees required to work remotely.

Research Design & Methods: Literature review and analysis, the results of surveys and thematic workshops with groups of managers.

Findings: A definition of enforced remote work and an indication of proposed research areas and methodological limitations.

Implications/Recommendations: The article adopts a thesis about the significant difference between the conditions affecting the way employees work: during remote work and during enforced (unplanned) remote work. In addition to the attempt to characterise and organise the

conditions influencing the behaviour of employees doing enforced remote work, the article identifies practical challenges which managers managing remote employees face.

Contribution: The authors formulate future research challenges in the area of employee management tools used for enforced remote work and hybrid work, and in the search for a relationship between the conditions of such work and its effectiveness.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: enforced remote working, employee behaviour, managing remote workers, hybrid working.

JEL Classification: M12, M54.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Identyfikacja wyzwań badawczych, przed którymi stoją naukowcy i praktycy poszukujący skutecznych rozwiązań w zakresie kształtowania zachowań pracowników w sytuacji wymuszonej pracy zdalnej.

Metodyka badań: Przegląd i analiza literatury, wyniki badań ankietowych oraz wyniki warsztatów tematycznych dla menedżerów.

Wyniki badań: Sformułowanie definicji wymuszonej pracy zdalnej oraz wskazanie propozycji obszarów badawczych i ograniczeń metodologicznych.

Wnioski: W artykule przyjęto tezę o istotnej różnicy między warunkami wpływającymi na sposób pracy pracowników: podczas pracy zdalnej i podczas wymuszonej (nieplanowanej) pracy zdalnej. Scharakteryzowano i uporządkowano uwarunkowania wpływające na zachowania pracowników podczas wymuszonej pracy zdalnej, a także wskazano obszary wyzwań praktycznych, przed którymi stoją menedżerowie zarządzający pracownikami wykonującymi pracę zdalną.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Autorzy sformułowali przyszłe wyzwania badawcze w obszarze narzędzi zarządzania pracownikami w warunkach wymuszonej pracy zdalnej i pracy hybrydowej oraz poszukiwania zależności między uwarunkowaniami takiej pracy a jej efektywnością.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

Słowa kluczowe: wymuszona praca zdalna, zachowania pracowników, zarządzanie pracownikami wykonującymi pracę zdalną, praca hybrydowa.

1. Introduction

The subject of this paper is the situation of enforced remote working that has grown out of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the opinion of the authors, this trend should be examined carefully as it has far-reaching consequences.

While the determinants and course of remote working are relatively well recognised, the practice adopted by enterprises does not always allow for smooth adaptation of the existing solutions, especially with regard to the extent and pace required

due to the pandemic. The thesis put forward by the authors is that the time of the pandemic and the need for many workers to suddenly switch to the remote working mode has significantly changed the determinants, the extent of their impact, and the traditionally assessed effects of work (apart from the narrowly understood results of this work, how it is performed considering the long-term change of the place where it is performed are also important).

The main research questions posed here are, first, what is enforced remote work and, second, how efficient is it? In seeking to answer these questions, others are enlisted: How can enforced remote work be defined? Which of the factors influencing the organisation of work are of key importance when remote work is enforced? Has the approach to how remote work is organised changed, and how has it changed when it was forced? What challenges have arisen for managers? What challenges does enforced remote work generate from the point of view of scientific research (its scope and approach to methodology)?

The aim of the paper is to indicate the research challenges facing researchers and practitioners looking for effective solutions in shaping employees' behaviours in cases where they are required to work remotely. The methodology comprised two main steps: a literature review, conducted to define enforced remote working and its key determinants, followed by a case study identifying the practical aspects that determine effective remote working.

2. Remote Working as a Subject of Research – A Literature Review

Text analysis was performed using two databases: EBSCO (Business Searching Interface) and Web of Science. We first collected words whose meaning was related to remote work by using publicly available online synonym dictionaries. We then grouped these terms and used them as query phrases. To verify the relevance of the initial search phrases, we conducted a subjective assessment to determine how well they matched the topic. The procedure is presented graphically in Figure 1.

The results are presented graphically in Figure 2. The search in the Web of Science database found a total of 21,800 items for the abstract search model and 16,239 for the topic search model. These were filtered to limit the results to “academic journals” and the resulting figures came in at 3,559 and 1,889 items, respectively.

The search in the EBSCO database found a total of 9,114 items for the abstract search model and 10,262 for the topic search. The search results were limited to the following publication types: articles, proceedings papers, early access, book chapters, books, and data papers. This yielded 8,877 and 9,819 items, respectively.

Interest in tele and remote work has increased significantly since 2020, though the results of the Web of Science database also indicate that interest also rose in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

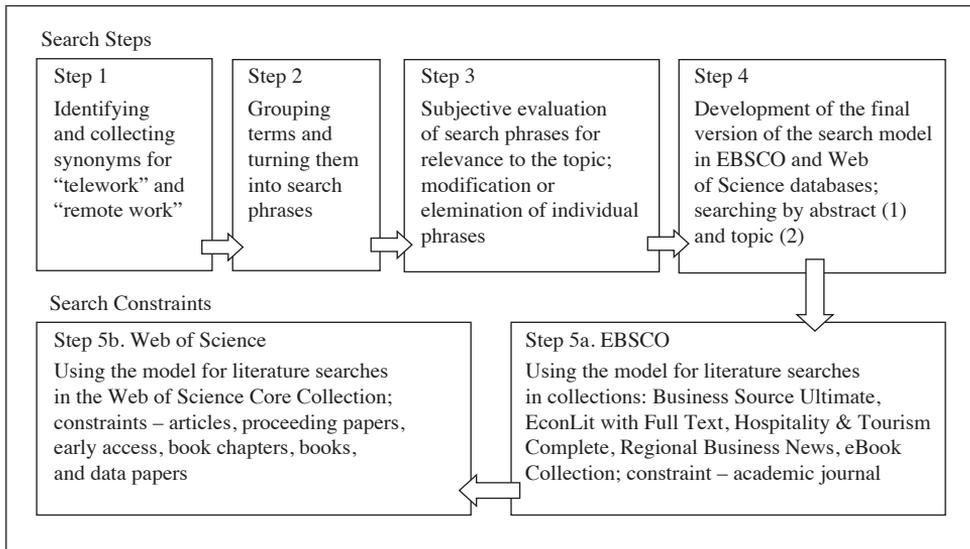


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the Literature Review Process

Source: the authors.

The frequency with which the topic is taken up (despite its apparent consolidation in previous years) prompts questions about the uniqueness of the pandemic period for the practice of telework. A positive aspect to have emerged from remote work being enforced is that the determinants of telework have changed, i.e. the interdisciplinary factors influencing the way it is organised and the effects that are achieved, including technical, organisational, and social ones.

During the pandemic, the role of technical solutions, including ones brought about by Industry 4.0, were discussed (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella 2021). The technical aspects concern organisational considerations, such as how the home space is arranged to create office or work space (Solís 2016), its ergonomics, cyber security (Burrell 2020) as well as simple consideration including one's internet connection speed (Dolot 2020, Taylor 2020). Studies show that the efficiency of teleworking is affected by the number of days that are spent doing it and the flexibility of this work (Solís 2016). However, the choice to telework or not was largely limited during the pandemic. This flexibility of work is also related to the level of control or trust the employer extends to the employee, which significantly affects the level of efficiency that remote workers achieve (Maltseva, Shulgina & Kalimov 2020). Studies have looked at the impact of the level of control of working time (and the course of work) on the need to rest and recover after work and the level of concentration at work (Biron & van Veldhoven 2016). Some authors have also examined the relationship between job demand and its connection to control.

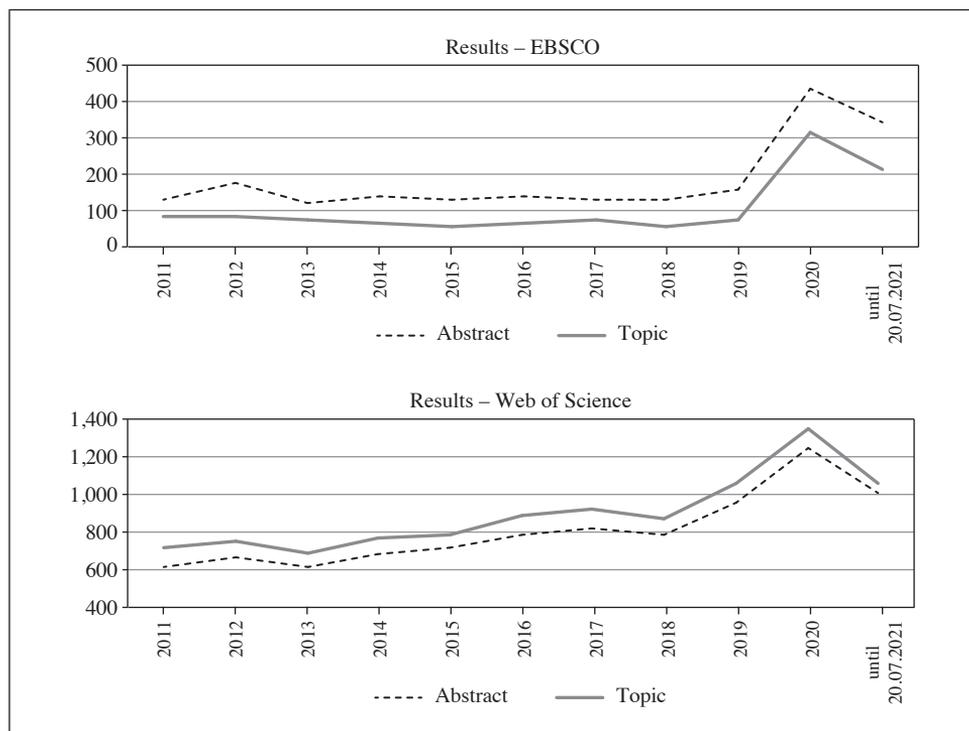


Fig. 2. The Scale of Researchers' Interest in the Problems Affecting Teleworking

Source: the authors.

Some authors point out that organisational culture also has a significant impact on the outcomes of work that is flexibly organised (Putnam, Myers & Gailliard 2014). By way of example, poor support (particularly difficult at the onset of a pandemic) and a lack of trust in employees as well as unrealistic expectations of them can lead to tensions and unhealthy work practices (Perlow & Kelly 2014, de Klerk, Joubert & Mosca 2021). At the same time, work culture (particularly as concerns the structural dimensions of work culture like flexible work hours or a family-friendly culture) is an important factor in defining employee well-being (Stankevičienė *et al.* 2021).

The issues cited above demonstrate the need for a more individualised approach to the study of remote working. Numerous authors point out the dependence of the effectiveness of remote working on the employee's willingness to accept it, the flow of experience between employees (and previous experience in remote working) and the employee's individual environment, including disruptions (cf. Prodanova & Kocarev 2021). Other factors influence whether conditions are stimulating or

constraining, including employee knowledge (Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic & Campbell 2016), the scope of their responsibility, and the duration of the work actually performed (Solís 2016).

Further arguments in favour of an individual approach to how remote work is studied include the employees' family circumstances and their roles in life (Hilbrecht *et al.* 2008). Factors directly influencing remote working include the need to care for elderly family members, the presence of children at home, and the need to oversee children's own remote activity – learning and studying (Dolot 2020). These elements all became particularly important during the pandemic.

Many authors have done analyses that consider the cultural context (Çoban 2021), or distinguish results by the social characteristics of the group being studied. Research findings confirm that the gender and age of employees are important factors in an employee's attitude to remote work (Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021).

Finally, it is also worth looking at the interplay between these determinants and the effects achieved. Such effects include the reinforcement effect, where workplace flexibility (geographic flexibility) can be a non-pecuniary motive strengthening the effects of teleworking (Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson 2020). The opposite effect may also occur: employees strongly encouraged or required to work from home may lack the proper conditions and become discouraged from doing their jobs (Taylor 2020). Such a situation – one of coercion – was actually the case during the pandemic. The unique determinants the pandemic period brought about confirm that enforced remote working calls for in-depth examination.

For example, it has been reported that some who work remotely feel guilty about doing so. They believe that their managers and colleagues view them as lazy and out of touch (Wilkie 2017). Such a strong effect did not occur when remote work was being enforced during the pandemic, so no solutions to combat this feeling of guilt or the consequences thereof emerged. At the same time, many studies done during the pandemic report claims that contradict other studies. Some emphasise that working at that time negatively affected employees' efficiency (Narayana-murthy & Tortorella 2021) while others highlight groups of employees for whom this remote work proved beneficial (Eriksson & Petrosian 2020). Similarly, before the pandemic, employees were reported to have had an overall more positive work experience when teleworking. They achieved higher levels of job performance and job satisfaction, and coped better with objective, creative tasks while teleworking (Vega, Anderson & Kaplan 2015).

Regardless of the assumptions made or the groups of employees examined, researchers have confirmed that organisations that strive to achieve employee work efficiency and maintain employee motivation in the circumstances created by the

pandemic should update their human resource management strategies (Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021). At the same time, employers' efforts during the pandemic were often directed towards survival and continuity, and there was a risk (characteristic of periods of crisis, cf. Ayoko, Ang & Parry 2017) of undervaluing human resources.

Such a situation does not occur when the implementation of remote working is planned. Four factors account for this:

- 1) arrangements are made for organisational matters, working time, task allocation, and supervision,
- 2) solutions related to covering the cost of workplace preparation,
- 3) preparing the physical workplace,
- 4) technical solutions concerning the substantive content of the work, communications and control.

Planning remote working therefore allows for adaptation, exchange of experience and gradual improvement. The organisation of a remote working model often provides for a gradual transition from stationary mode through partial work from the office (single days of the week or month). The validity of this approach has been confirmed by studies defining the ideal ratio of remote working to office working as two to three days per week (de Klerk, Joubert & Mosca 2021). Such solutions improve process flow while also mitigating the social consequences of remote working.

The pandemic aside, many authors have looked at heterogeneity of remote working. In the literature, there is a distinction between traditional work-from-home and work-from-anywhere, which both offer both temporal and geographic flexibility. Some writers (Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson 2020) point out that output rises while not affecting the incidence of rework, and that there is an increase in observable effort during transitions from traditional work-from-home to work-from-anywhere. A similarly interesting distinction is made between high-intensity and low-intensity teleworking (Biron & van Veldhoven 2016). Of particular note in this context is the fact that there are companies operating entirely remotely (Choudhury *et al.* 2020).

In light of the above, it seems appropriate to distinguish the situation of enforced remote working, which can be defined as remote working that is required of employees and employers due to external factors in a sudden manner that is difficult to plan and organise in advance.

In preparation for a broader study, the authors conducted a pilot study aimed at isolating the characteristic features of the period of remote working in the pandemic and properly designing further research.

3. Empirical Findings

A study was carried out as part of a broader collaboration with a subsidiary of an international financial group. The company uses internationally recognised labour standards, and its activities are regulated more than the average company. Moreover, it must – during a pandemic or not – maintain business continuity. The selection of the enterprise was based on availability, with the respondents being workshop participants (managers chosen by the company). Most of the employees perform clerical work and the work they do is highly computerised. The participants were free to express opinions during the workshops. The data obtained from the survey were anonymous.

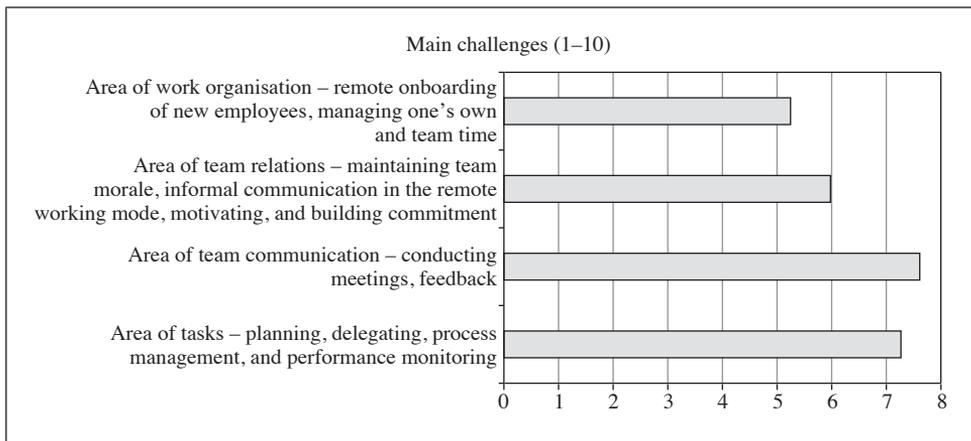


Fig. 3. Ranking of the Importance of the Areas of Managerial Work during the Period of Required Remote Working (on a Scale of 1–10, Average of the Scores)

Source: the authors.

The survey was conducted in August 2020 and was structured around the following:

1) an initial interview with the HR manager who is jointly responsible for matters such as organising remote work during the pandemic; the purpose of the interview was to outline the challenges faced by the organisation when organising remote work;

2) a survey of a sample group of 20 middle and senior managers. The survey identified the areas of managerial work that were considered the most important to improve in order to ensure smooth operation on the teams; questions were based on results of an initial interview.

We conducted an online workshop with a group of 20 managers who had previously participated in the survey. During the workshop, a brainstorming discussion

was held to identify the advantages and disadvantages of remote working, the impact of remote working on the scope of tasks, and a list of principles of teamwork and managerial tasks in remote working. Figure 3 presents the results of the surveys on the areas of managerial work.

During the workshop, the opportunities and benefits as well as the risks and concerns associated with remote working were identified. These are summarised below:

1) opportunities and benefits:

- free choice of where to work,
- time savings, improved time management, ensuring punctuality,
- free and smooth exchange of information,
- improved document management,
- more frequent contact between team members (especially in previously dispersed teams),
- a positive climate for implementing other changes,
- the opportunity to devote more time to family life;

2) risks and concerns:

- the ability to freely choose one's place of work creates a "compulsion" to work everywhere,
- the "compulsion" of being constantly available,
- being forced to adapt to the working hours of other workers (e.g. before noon for those looking after children engaged in remote learning during the pandemic, for example),
- problems with full communication using remote channels,
- difficulty in reading people's emotions (when delegating tasks, for example),
- problems resulting from the organisation of the workplace (space, immediate work tools or internet connection speed),
- challenges related to organising family life (when everyone is working or learning remotely),
- problem with building relationships (on new or changed teams, with new employees),
- the risk of overworking due to the tension of remote working and pandemic situations (especially given that some processes organised remotely are more time-consuming),
- the burden of fear and stress (associated with the pandemic and working in isolation),
- the risk of excessive use of sick leave by employees (or childcare leave – which is linked to the legal arrangements applicable during a pandemic),
- uncertainty about the future (the current situation cannot be improved or current problems caused by remote working cannot be solved).

The workshop also addressed changing the scope of work and examined factors that increase or decrease the range of duties:

- 1) reduction in the scope of responsibilities:
 - savings from using less paper,
 - reducing the number of meetings within the company and with customers;
- 2) increasing the scope of responsibilities:
 - additional reporting and providing additional information,
 - more frequent and prolonged communications (hampered because of remote channels and with difficult timing),
 - time required for allocation of tasks (handing over and checking them), particularly short and one-off tasks,
 - the need to operate the work infrastructure (setting up communication equipment and organising the workspace),
 - more time needed to onboard new employees and team members,
 - more time needed to maintain and build team relationships.

The above ordering allowed for a discussion of solutions. These were formulated as principles to be introduced in the work of teams and managers:

- 1) setting rules for rostering (e.g. mandatory attendance), establishing how to mark break time, standby time and busy time,
- 2) establishing revised time and task accounting rules, indicating changes in the evaluation methods,
- 3) setting rules for organising private affairs (defining emergencies, setting rules and times for childcare among other things),
- 4) introducing standards for communications by email and instant messaging as part of the company's "netiquette".

Similarly, additional managerial tasks were formulated during the discussion:

- 1) ensuring each employee has appropriate working conditions, supporting employees (creating a sense of caring for the employee);
- 2) providing time for team and relationship building, individual relationships, team matters and employees' personal matters;
- 3) planning stress-relief activities;
- 4) expanding information on long-term objectives, scenarios for dealing with changes in the situation, plans for changing work rules or processes.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The scale of the challenges associated with enforced remote working and the problems that could be encountered during the survey are evident in the difference between the survey responses and the managerial principles and tasks developed by the participants.

In the survey, the highest importance was attributed to team communication and the area of tasks. At the same time, following the SWOT analysis conducted during the workshop, it was revealed that, when determining the principles and tasks to be implemented, the managers focused on how work is organised (mainly in terms of time, but also of communication), accountability at work and team relationships. This may have come as somewhat of a surprise as it was the areas of organisation and team relationships that were initially evaluated as less important.

The workshop was not designed to evaluate the individual components. However, from the perspective of assessing the differences between planned and enforced remote work, the results can at least tentatively be divided into several categories. Such a division may concern both the assessment of the benefits and threats, the assessment of the scope of work, and the lists of tasks and rules developed by the managers. For the purposes of the discussion, a category of components was distinguished:

- 1) universal – unchangeable,
- 2) determined by the nature of the work,
- 3) resulting from the enforcement of remote working.

At the same time, the nature of the activities carried out will also influence the strength of the other components. For example, programmers working in an IT company will be affected differently by enforced remote work (as opposed to planned remote work) than front desk employees will be. Accordingly, such a distinction was made further in the discussion that would make it possible to identify the main determinants influencing the evaluation (and future study) of enforced remote work, and the distinction based on the scope of the issue in question was therefore abandoned.

Five main individual characteristics emerged from the examination of the advantages and disadvantages of enforced remote work and the attendant changes in the scope of work and the suggested principles. They include:

- 1) the nature of the work,
- 2) the organisation of work,
- 3) technical solutions,
- 4) communication and maintaining relationships,
- 5) the employee's individual circumstances.

The nature of the work has a direct impact on how it is carried out. For example, the response indicating a change in the scope of work points to savings in time due to reduced documentation requirements or fewer meetings with customers. However, the way in which working time is organised relates to rules set at the enterprise or team level. In some enterprises these may be more formalised regardless of the form of work while in others such formalisation may not be required first during

the pandemic. In any case, the efficiency of the former ones will be higher and the scope for change smaller. This will influence the evaluation of remote work as such.

Similarly, the scope of control or the manner of dealing with accountability for work activities and their results depends to a large extent on the characteristics of the position and the company itself. Other authors have observed that how the control and monitoring system is organised will affect the results of teleworking (Maltseva, Shulgina & Kalimov 2020).

How work is organised also depends on the range of technical solutions adopted, but the tools used will always affect the organisation, the substantive work and the communication. As a case in point, consider the use of electronic workflow. Depending on the scope of its implementation (or lack thereof), remote work may come with significant advantages or threats and difficulties. In the example analysed, the digitisation of workflow was an advantage. Such digitisation affects not only task performance, but also communication and maintaining relationships as well as the ability to resolve conflicts. Of course, as was revealed by our study, different groups of employees in different organisations (with different organisational cultures) may have different experiences, habits and needs in the area of team building.

The emotional sphere and each employee's individual circumstances were also examined in the pilot study. The impact of family life on work and the efficiency of work processes are important factors. While the way work is organised and the rules governing work (as interdependent conditions) can influence family life (cf. Solís 2016), the pandemic situation made their implementation much more difficult and repeatedly showed that enforced remote work can have deleterious effects on household members.

The above analysis of literature and workshop results therefore shows that the evaluation of remote work can vary depending on:

- 1) the initial situation in terms of organisation, communication and digitisation of work;
- 2) the scope and efficiency of technical support regarding the two variables:
 - the gap between the solutions currently in use and the solutions required for effective remote working,
 - the ability of IT departments to implement solutions in a short period of time;
- 3) broadly understood behavioural aspects associated with the functioning of the teams themselves;
- 4) the market situation (in the labour market), the social situation and probably the psychological status;
- 5) the employees' individual circumstances.

While the market and social situations are factors that influence remote working regardless of whether it is planned and required, aspects of employees' psychological well-being must be taken into account as an important variable for both

researchers and managers alike. Many authors engaged in analysing this issue before the pandemic (e.g. Anderson, Kaplan & Vega 2015, Biron & van Veldhoven 2016) indicated that remote working is less stressful. In contrast, during the pandemic, employees' mental health was reported to have deteriorated (e.g. Izdebski & Mazur 2021, Williams 2021). Challenges related to uncertainty or stress are also highlighted in our results, as are solutions involving interpersonal relationships and coping with emotions in remote working.

It is also worth paying attention to the scope and efficiency of IT support – the sudden implementation of numerous solutions may have a negative impact on employee adaptability and, in terms of feedback, on the condition and efficiency of the technical support teams themselves.

The list of determinants found in the literature of the broadly understood effectiveness of remote working (among its other features) is very rich. An analysis of examples from during the pandemic suggests that these determinants are changing and depend on many internal and external factors. Some paradoxes and feedback loops – elements that are mutually dependent and seemingly mutually exclusive – have also been exposed. These make it extremely difficult to search for closed catalogues of determinants and examine the strength of their influence on the effects of remote working, or even to attempt to assess these effects during required remote work.

Researchers investigating enforced remote work need to take these considerations into account and should employ qualitative research (e.g. natural experiment or case study, e.g. Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson 2020) that allows for, among other issues, competencies to be taken into account and explored (e.g. Zdonek, Podgórska & Hysa 2017) and social support to be assessed (e.g. through interviews, e.g. Collins, Hislop & Cartwright 2016). Researchers would also do well to consider the need for a sector-related approach, one that examines the specificity of the particular professions (e.g. Ozturk, Avci & Kaya 2021), as well as elements specific to particular social groups. Often mentioned in cultural contexts, discussions about gender, age or nationality, the issue of diversity comes to mind here. However, it seems reasonable to apply this approach to the assessment of remote working while considering age (e.g. Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021), living and family situation (cf. Fonner & Stache 2012) or individual characteristics such as the need for social contact.

While researchers will continue to use research questionnaires to study enforced remote work (e.g. Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021), such studies should set out to indicate certain correlations between conditions or tools of work and the actual effects of work. Rather, the aim should be to openly indicate methods of coping with unfavourable conditions (e.g. Maltseva, Shulgina & Kalimov 2020). For example, by creating a toolbox for managers.

As the preliminary study has shown, aspects of employees' psychological condition, or broader issues of management psychology, are an extremely important issue with regard to enforced remote working. While these issues are worth studying, taking into account behavioural aspects, technological conditions must not be left out of the conversation. It is precisely the interdependence of conditions and the need for an individual approach that constitute the main research challenges. They should influence both the manner of research and of anticipating the results.

The study is based on a case study from financial sector, and generalised conclusions cannot be generalised beyond it. However, it does suggest that there is a need for research in other sectors and for comparative analysis to be done. We ourselves intend to extend the present study to include the impact of the tools applied here, including both technical and organisational ones, on the course of enforced remote working. That extension will likewise avoid linking particular solutions with the final effects.

While we hope a pandemic similar in scale to the one brought about by COVID-19 will never again occur, the social consequences of recent times, including mistakes made in the organisation of remote working, will remain in companies for some time. Current learning and experience gained will also encourage companies to partially maintain remote working, and widespread globalisation will certainly result in a more frequent use of enforced remote working and collaboration.

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