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Research challenges concerning employees in the situation of enforced remote working

Abstract

Objective: Identification of research challenges faced by scientists and practitioners looking for effective solutions in the field of shaping the behavior of employees in a situation of forced remote work.

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

Findings: Formulating the definition of forced remote work and 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 forced (unplanned) remote work. In addition to the attempt to characterize and organize the conditions influencing the behavior of employees during forced remote work, the article identifies areas of practical challenges faced by managers managing remote employees.

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

Article type: original article.

Key words: enforced remote working, employee behaviour, managing remote workers, hybrid working

JEL Classification: M12, M54

Wyzwania badawcze dotyczące pracowników w sytuacji wymuszonej pracy zdalnej

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 z grupą 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. Oprócz próby scharakteryzowania i uporządkowania uwarunkowań wpływających na zachowania pracowników podczas wymuszonej pracy zdalnej, artykuł identyfikuje obszary wyzwań praktycznych, przed którymi stoją menedżerowie zarządzający pracownikami zdalnymi.

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 zdalnymi, praca hybrydowa

Introduction

The subject of this paper is the situation of enforced remote working. In the opinion of the authors, the emergence of the phenomenon of 'enforced' remote working caused by the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be singled out as it has far-reaching consequences.

While the knowledge on the determinants and the course of remote working is 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 situation. 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 strength of their impact, as well as the traditionally assessed effects of work (apart from the narrowly understood results of this work, what is also important is e.g. the way in which it is performed considering the long-term change of the place where it is performed).

In view of the above, the aim of the paper is to indicate the research challenges facing researchers and practitioners looking for effective solutions in the field of shaping employees' behaviours in the situation of forced remote working. The methodological approach comprised two main steps: a literature review in order to define forced remote working and to identify its key determinants, and a case study in order to identify the practical aspects that determine effective remote working.

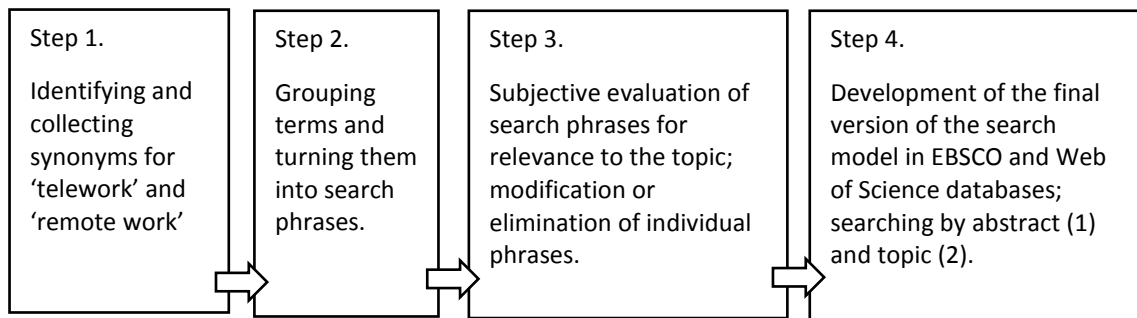
Remote working as a subject of research in the light of literature review

While exploring the interest of researchers in remote working, the number of publications on this topic was verified. The analysis was performed using two databases, i.e. EBSCO (Business Searching Interface) and Web of Science (determined by the availability and the possibility to use advanced criteria).

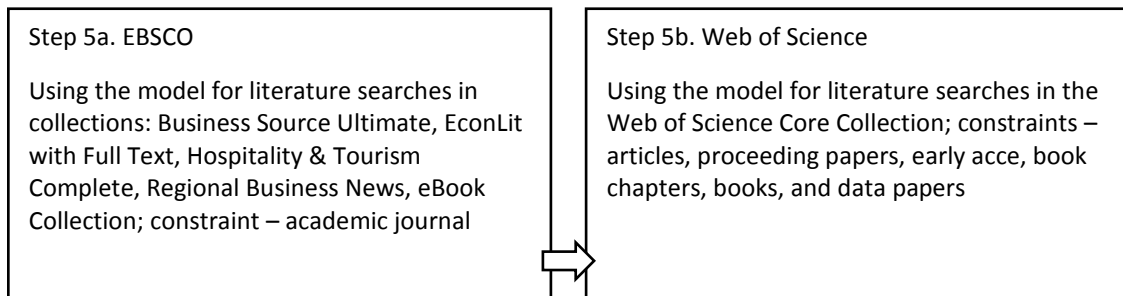
In the first instance, an attempt was made to collect words the meaning of which is related to remote working by using publicly available online synonym dictionaries.. Next, these terms were grouped together to be used as query phrases. In order to verify the relevance of the matching of the initial search phrases, a subjective assessment was made as to how well they matched the topic of consideration. The procedure has been presented graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Flowchart of the literature review process

Model development steps



Search constraints

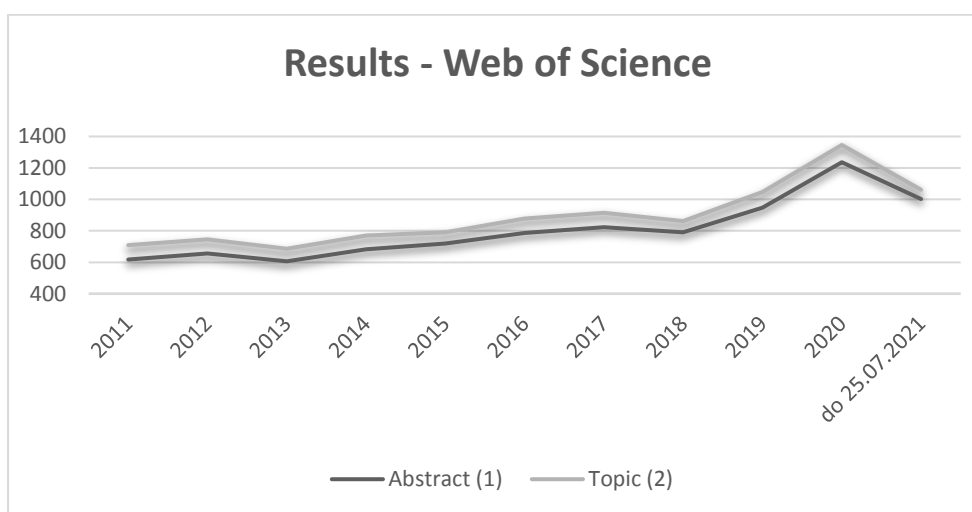
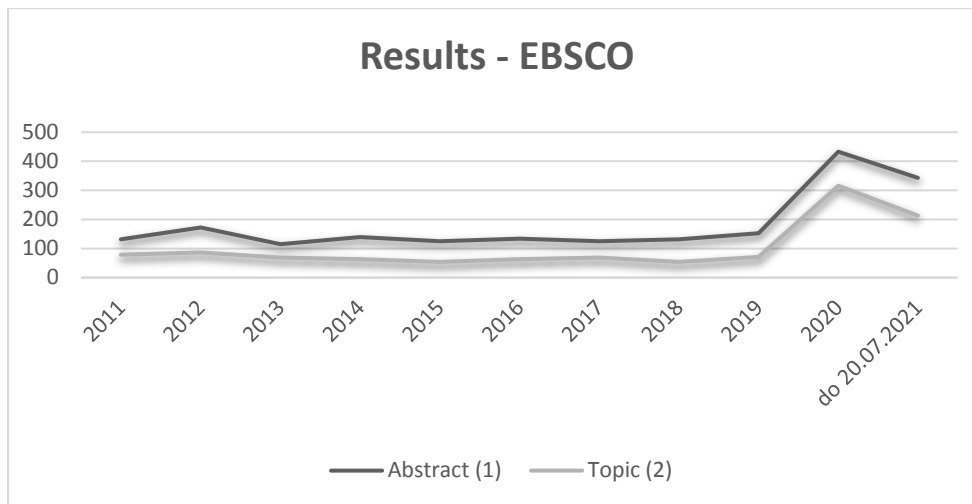


Source: own work.

The results have been 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, which were filtered to limit the results to 'academic journals' with 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, proceeding papers, early access, book chapters, books, and data papers, which yielded 8,877 and 9,819 items, respectively.

Figure 2. The scale of researchers' interest in the problems of teleworking



Source: own work

It should be noted that there is a significant increase in the interest concerning the matter beginning in 2020 even though the results of the Web of Science database also indicate an increase in the interest in 2019.

The frequency with which the topic is taken up (despite its apparent consolidation in previous years) also calls for raising the question once more about the specificity of the recent period (the pandemic period) for the practice of telework. The distinction of forced remote working and undertaking separate research related to this topic may be related to the change in the determinants of telework, i.e. the interdisciplinary factors influencing the way it is organised and the effects that are achieved, among which three types were distinguished:

- 1) technical;
- 2) organisational;

3) social.

During the pandemic, attention was drawn to the role of technical solutions, including those in the field of Industry 4.0 (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella 2021).

The technical aspects are related to the organisational considerations, such as e.g. the way the office home space is arranged (Solís 2016) and its ergonomics, cyber security (Burrell 2020) or seemingly such simple conditions as the internet connection speed (Dolot 2020, Taylor 2020). According to studies, the efficiency is affected by the number of days that are spent teleworking and the flexibility of this work (Solís 2016). However, this choice was largely limited in the case of the pandemic. This flexibility of work is also related to the level of control or trust of the employer towards the employee, which significantly affects the level of efficiency of remote workers (Maltseva, Shulgina & Kalimov 2020). Attention is drawn to the impact of the level of control of working time (and the course of work) on the need for rest after work, or the level of concentration (need for recovery and concentration) (Biron & Veldhoven 2016) but authors addressing the topic have also drawn attention to the relation of job demand and its links with control.

When discussing organisational factors, there is no way to ignore organisational culture. According to authors approaching the topic, organisational culture has a significant impact on the outcomes of work that is flexibly organised (Putnam, Myers & Gailliard 2014). By way of example, low support (particularly difficult at the onset of a pandemic) and 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 (structural dimensions of work culture like temporal flexibility or family-friendly culture) are important factors in defining employee well-being (Stankevičienė, Tamaševičius, Diskienė, Grakauskas, Žygimantas & Rudinskaja 2021).

The arguments cited above also demonstrate the need for a more individualised approach to the study of remote working. Many authors point out the dependence of the effectiveness of remote working on the level of acceptance of such work by the employee, the flow of experience between employees (and previous experience in remote working) and the individual environment of the employee (including disruptive elements) (cf. Prodanova & Kocarev 2021). Other factors that influence whether conditions are stimulating or constraining also include the knowledge of employees (Boell, Cecez-

Kecmanovic & Campbell 2016), the scope of responsibility, and the duration of the work actually performed (Solís 2016).

Further arguments in favour of an individual approach include the employees' family circumstances and their roles in life (Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson & Andrey 2008). Factors directly influencing remote working include e.g. the care of elderly family members, the presence of children at home, and the care of children during remote learning (Dolot 2020); these elements became particularly important during the pandemic.

Many authors also perform analyses that take into account 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 work remotely (Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021).

In conclusion, it is also worth looking at the interplay between these determinants and the effects achieved. An example of this may be the reinforcement effect where e.g. workplace flexibility (geographic flexibility) can be a non-pecuniary motive strengthening the effects of teleworking (Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson 2020). Similarly, the opposite effect may occur: employees strongly encouraged or forced to work from home may not have the proper conditions and become discouraged from performing such work (Taylor 2020), and such a situation (of coercion) was actually the case during the pandemic.

The unique character of the determinants the pandemic period seems to confirm that forced remote working deserves special mention.

For example, it is indicated that people who work remotely tend to feel guilty about doing so. They believe that their managers and colleagues view them as lazy and out of touch (Wilkie 2017). Such an effect did not occur during the pandemic, and consequently there did not emerge any solutions to combat this feeling of guilt or any consequences thereof. At the same time, many studies from the time of the pandemic seemingly exclude each other. Some emphasise that working at that time negatively affected employees' efficiency (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella 2021) while others highlight groups of employees for whom this form proved beneficial (Eriksson & Petrosian 2020). Similarly, before the pandemic, it was pointed out that employees 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 verified, researchers addressing the topic have confirmed that organisations taking care of achieving employee work efficiency and maintaining employee motivation in the circumstances created by the pandemic should update their human resource management strategies (Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021). However, it is worth noting that 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 in the case of the planned process of implementing remote working. This is because it includes actions such as:

- 1) arrangements concerning organisational matters, working time, task allocation, and supervision;
- 2) solutions related to covering the cost of workplace preparation;
- 3) preparation of 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. Organisation of remote working often provides for a gradual transition from the stationary mode through partial work from the office (single days of the week or month). The validity of this approach is 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 do not only allow for better solutions from the perspective of process flow perspective but also mitigate the social consequences of remote working.

Regardless of the pandemic, many authors point out the heterogeneity of the remote working situation. Referring both to the conditions discussed below and justifying the distinction in definitions, it is worth looking at the distinction appearing in the literature between traditional work-from-home and work-from-anywhere, which offer both temporal and geographic flexibility. Authors addressing the topic (Choudhury & Foroughi 2020) draw attention to an increase in output without affecting the incidence of rework, and 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 & Veldhoven 2016), and noteworthy

in this context is the fact that there are companies operating entirely remotely (Choudhury, Crowston, Dahlander, Minervini & Raghuram 2020).

It therefore seems appropriate to distinguish the situation of enforced remote working. While, we will obviously be making reference to the pandemic period, it is worth formulating the definition itself, indicating that **enforced remote working is remote working that is forced upon employees and employers due to some external factors in a sudden manner that is difficult to plan and organise in advance.**

Thus, distinguishing the issue of enforced remote working means that it requires to be treated separately. 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.

Empirical findings

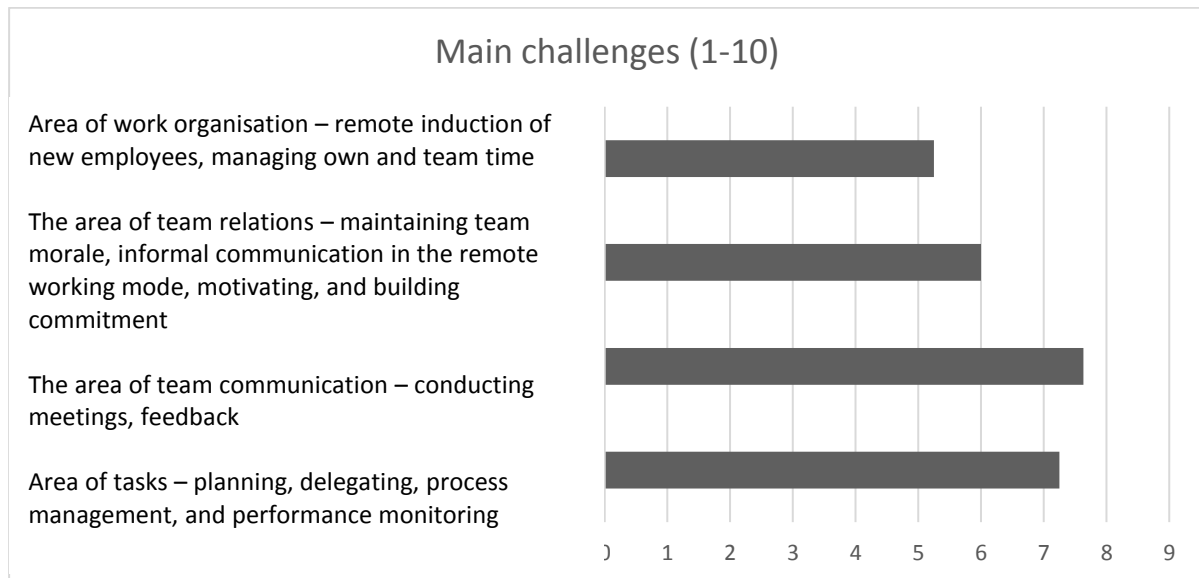
For this purpose, a study was carried out as part of a broader collaboration with one of the companies of an international financial group. In characterising the entity, it should be noted that it uses internationally recognised labour standards, its activities are regulated more than the average company; moreover, it has to maintain business continuity (even during a pandemic). At the same time, most of its employees perform clerical work and the processes carried out by them are highly computerised.

The survey was conducted in August 2020 and the structure of the survey included:

- 1) an initial interview with the HR manager who is jointly responsible for matters such as organising remote working during the pandemic; the purpose of the interview was to outline the challenges faced by the organisation when organising remote working;
- 2) a survey of a sample group of 20 middle and senior managers which identified the areas of managerial work the improvement of which was judged most important in order to ensure the smooth operation of the teams;
- 3) an online workshop with a group of 20 managers who had previously participated in the survey, during which a brainstorming discussion was held identifying 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.

The results of the surveys in the form of areas of managerial work are included in Fig. 3.

Figure 3. Ranking of the importance of the areas of managerial work during the period of enforced remote working (in a scale of 1-10, average of the scores)



Source: own work.

During the workshop itself, the opportunities and benefits as well as the risks and concerns associated with the current remote working were identified; these are summarised below:

1) opportunities and benefits:

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

2) risks and concerns:

- the possibility to freely choose the place of work creates a ‘compulsion’ to work at every place;
- ‘compulsion’ of being constantly available;

- being forced to adapt to the working hours of other workers (e.g. before noon in the case of those who have to look after children learning remotely in the pandemic);
- problems with full communication using remote channels;
- difficulty in reading people's emotions (e.g. when delegating tasks);
- problems resulting from the organisation of the workplace (space, immediate work tools or internet connection speed);
- challenges related to organising family life (when everyone works or learns remotely);
- problem with building relationships (e.g. in new, changed teams, with new employees);
- the risk of overworking due to the tension of remote working and pandemic situations (especially when 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 for the duration of a pandemic);
- uncertainty about the future (no possibility of improving the current situation or solving current problems caused by remote working).

The workshop also addressed the topic of changing the scope of work, looking for factors that increase or decrease the range of duties:

1) reduction in the scope of responsibilities:

- savings associated with the abandonment of the circulation of paper documents;
- 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 of allocating (handing over and checking) tasks (in particular short and one-off tasks);
- the necessity to operate the work infrastructure (setting up communication equipment and organising the workspace);
- longer time (and difficulty) of induction of new employees and new team members;
- more difficult (time-consuming) process of maintaining and building 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 method of evaluation;
- 3) setting rules for organising private affairs (defining emergencies, setting rules and times e.g. for childcare);
- 4) introducing standards for communications by email and instant messaging as part of the so-called netiquette.

Similarly, additional managerial tasks were formulated during the discussion:

- 1) making sure about each employee's working conditions, trying to support (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-relieving activities;
- 4) expanding information on long-term objectives, scenarios for dealing with changes in the situation, plans for changing work rules or processes.

Discussion and conclusions

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

In the survey, the highest importance was attributed to the area of team communication and the area of tasks. At the same time, after the SWOT analysis conducted during the workshop, when determining the principles and tasks to be implemented, the managers focused on the organisation of work (mainly time, but also the organisation of communication), accountability at work and team relationships. Furthermore, it was the area of organisation and team relationships that was initially evaluated as less important. It was not the purpose of the workshop to evaluate the individual components. However, from the perspective of assessing the differences between planned and enforced remote working, it is worth dividing the results tentatively into several categories where this division may concern both the assessment of the benefits and threats, the assessment of the scope of work, as well as 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 working (as compared with planned remote working) than e.g. front desk employees. 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 working, and thus the distinction based on the scope of the issue in question was abandoned.

When commenting on the advantages and disadvantages indicated by the managers, as well as the changes in the scope of work and the suggested principles, it can be seen that they encompass many individual characteristics related to each area. The following areas were distinguished:

- 1) the nature of the work;
- 2) the organisation of work;
- 3) the 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 enterprise or team level. In some enterprises it may be more formalised regardless of the form of work while and in others such formalisation may not be required first during the pandemic; 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. And other authors have pointed out that the way the control and monitoring system is organised will affect the very effects of teleworking (Maltseva, Shulgina & Kalimov 2020).

The way work is organised also depends on the range of **technical solutions** adopted although it should be noted that the tools used will affect the organisation, the substantive work and e.g. the communication. An example of this could be the use of electronic workflow. Depending on the scope of its implementation (or lack thereof), there may be significant advantages or threats and difficulties concerning remote working. In the example analysed, digitisation of workflow was an advantage.

It affects not only the performance of substantive work, but also **communication and maintaining relationships**, or the ability to resolve conflicts. It is obvious, however, that different groups of employees in different organisations (with different organisational culture) may have different experiences and habits in this area, and above all different needs, e.g. in the area of team building (as indicated in the study).

This is also related to the emotional sphere and each employee's individual circumstances. In the pilot study attention was paid e.g. to the impact of family life on work, but also to the impact of this life on the efficiency of work processes. While it is pointed out that the way work is organised and the rules of work (as interdependent conditions) can influence family life (cf. Solís 2016), the pandemic situation has made their implementation much more difficult and has repeatedly shown that enforced remote working can negatively affect the functioning of household members.

The above analysis therefore shows that the evaluation of remote working can be different depending on:

- 1) the initial situation in terms of organisation, communication and computerisation 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 whether it is planned and enforced, aspects of employees' psychological well-being must be taken into account as an important variable for both researchers and managers themselves. Many authors analysing the matter before the pandemic (e.g. Anderson, Kaplan & Vega 2014; Biron & Veldhoven 2016) have indicated that remote working is less stressful. In contrast, during the pandemic, deterioration of employees' mental health was reported (e.g. Izdebski & Mazur 2021; Williams 2021). Also in the results shown, challenges related to uncertainty or stress were highlighted, as well as solutions involving the sphere of interpersonal relationships or coping with emotions in remote working.

Similarly, it is worth paying attention to the scope and efficiency of IT support as a sudden implementation of many solutions may have a negative impact on the adaptability of the employees and, in a feedback manner, on the condition and efficiency of the technical support teams themselves.

The list of determinants of the broadly understood effectiveness of remote working (and its other features) found in the literature is very rich. An analysis of examples from the time of 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 were also exposed.

This makes 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 enforced work.

Researchers investigating the topic of enforced remote working need to take these caveats into account and should rather use qualitative research (e.g. natural experiment or case

study, e.g. Choudhury & Foroughi 2020) allowing for, inter alia, taking into account and exploring competencies (e.g. Zdonek, Podgórska & Hysa 2017), or assessing social support (e.g. through interviews, e.g. Collins, Hislop & Cartwright 2016). When conducting research, it is also worth taking into account the need for a sector-related approach, i.e. marking the specificity of the particular professions (e.g. Ozturk, Avci & Kaya 2021), as well as elements specific to particular social groups. The concept of diversity can be recalled here, one that is often mentioned in cultural contexts, in discussions about gender, age or nationality. However, it seems reasonable to apply this approach also to the assessment of remote working and take into account age (e.g. Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021), life and family situation (cf. Fonner, Stache & 2012) or, finally, individual characteristics such as the need for social contacts.

Of course, many authors will continue to use e.g. research questionnaires to study enforced remote work (e.g. Raišienė, Rapuano & Varkulevičiūtė 2021), but it is worth emphasising that studies should not be aimed at indicating certain correlations between conditions or tools of work and its effects. Rather, the aim should be to openly indicate methods of coping with unfavourable conditions (e.g. Maltseva, Shulgina & Kalimov 2020), i.e. 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. It is worthwhile to study these issues taking into account behavioural aspects, but not forgetting e.g. technological conditions. **It is this interdependence of conditions and the need for an individual approach that are the main research challenges, and thus they should influence both the manner of research and the manner of defining the expected results.**

The scope of the study presented is insufficient to formulate any generalised conclusions; however, the study does indicate the possibility of research hypotheses to be identified in the future. The authors plan to extend the study to include the impact of the tools applied, including both technical and organisational ones, on the course of enforced remote working, avoiding, however, absolute linking of particular solutions with the final effects. While it is to be hoped that a pandemic similar in scale will not recur, the social consequences of the recent time, including mistakes in the organisation of remote working, will remain in companies for longer (and has to be incultet in Covid-19 exit plans, compare: Turja, Krutova & Melin 2021). 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.

Acknowledgments

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