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The Development of the Effectiveness of Remote Work as Perceived by Employees and Managers

Kształtowanie efektywności pracy zdalnej
w percepcji pracowników i menedżerów

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article discusses how the effectiveness of remote work has developed and differences in how it is assessed by employees and managers. Two research questions are asked: 1) How do employees assess the impact of remote work tools on various aspects of operation? and 2) How do managers perceive and approach employee attitudes and opinions in this area?

Research Design & Methods: Computed-Assisted Web Interviews (CAWI) were conducted with 500 respondents (employees of companies with international capital). The results were then discussed (interviews) with 14 middle and senior managers.

Findings: Employees believed the technology and tools available had the most significant positive impact on innovation and organisation. In contrast, aspects related to communication and relationships had the lowest impact. Although manager's comments related to the effectiveness scores were divided, they did not contradict one another.

Implications/Recommendations: Based on the research, an attempt was made to distinguish key variables for managers. They include: work programming (rules, principles, control, KPIs),

ensuring autonomy (freedom in organising work and decision-making, ensuring trust), maintaining relationships (including effective communication) and one's own skills.

Contribution: It is important to understand that there are differences in how employees and managers perceive effectiveness and task performance efficiency. Managers' awareness of their employees' opinions is vital, as the interviews show.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: remote work, management tools, effectiveness, hybrid working.

JEL Classification: M12, M5.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: W artykule omówiono rozwój efektywności pracy zdalnej oraz różnice w jej ocenie z perspektywy pracowników i menedżerów. Postawiono dwa pytania badawcze: 1) jak pracownicy oceniają wpływ narzędzi pracy zdalnej na różne aspekty swojego działania? oraz 2) jak menedżerowie postrzegają postawy i opinie pracowników w tym obszarze i jak w związku z tym postępują?

Metodyka badań: Przeprowadzono wywiady internetowe wspomagane komputerowo (CAWI) z 500 respondentami (pracownikami firm z kapitałem zagranicznym). Wyniki zostały następnie omówione w wywiadach przeprowadzonych z 14 menedżerami średniego i wyższego szczebla.

Wyniki badań: Zdaniem pracowników technologia i dostępne narzędzia miały najbardziej znaczący pozytywny wpływ na innowacyjność i organizację pracy, a aspekty związane z komunikacją i relacjami wpływały na nie w najmniejszym stopniu. Mimo że opinie menedżerów związane z oceną efektywności były podzielone, nie były ze sobą sprzeczne.

Wnioski: Na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań podjęto próbę wyodrębnienia kluczowych zmiennych dla menedżerów. Należą do nich: programowanie pracy (reguł, zasad, kontroli, KPI), zapewnienie autonomii (swobody w organizowaniu pracy i podejmowaniu decyzji, zapewnienie zaufania), utrzymywanie relacji (w tym skuteczna komunikacja) oraz własne umiejętności.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Istotne jest zrozumienie różnic w postrzeganiu efektywności i wydajności wykonywanych zadań przez pracowników oraz menedżerów. Na podstawie przeprowadzonych wywiadów stwierdzono, że świadomość menedżerów dotycząca opinii pracowników ma kluczowe znaczenie.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

Słowa kluczowe: praca zdalna, narzędzia zarządzania, efektywność, praca hybrydowa.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated digital transformation in work environments. Although many people and professions have already returned to pre-pandemic habits and working methods, changes in office work, brought about by remote work, appear to have entered numerous organisations and management practices for good. As a result, hybrid work – defined as a combination of office

work and work from home or close to home (Ramani 2021) – is currently replacing remote work as a primary topic of interest (cf. Mitchell 2021).

During the pandemic, remote work was largely forced on organisations and their staff. While this is no longer the case, many managers and employers have not developed remote work standards, methods or tools for ensuring performance. In addition, they tend to vary in their assessments of such practices depending on individual experience. At the same time, the organisation of remote and hybrid work is likely to be among the most important HR challenges of the future (Raźniewski, Fierla-Jakubowicz & Oleksiuk 2021, Smite *et al.* 2023). This article discusses how the effectiveness of remote work has developed and differences in how it is assessed by employees and managers. It takes up the well-known topic of effectiveness in remote work, highlighting the differences in how it is perceived, which may determine its originality and importance for management science. In the empirical study, employees' opinions, gathered in a two-question survey, were critically assessed using an interview tool. The two questions were: 1) How do employees assess the impact of remote work tools on various aspects of operation? (with regard to innovation, effectiveness, maintaining relationships, communication, task performance and work organisation methods¹); and 2) How do managers perceive and approach employee attitudes and opinions in this area? While interest in this topic and the attempt to prove its importance were inspired by the common conviction that technology/IT tools are essential to the conduct of remote work (Deloitte Insights 2023), it is our thesis that the effectiveness of operation in the post-pandemic future will be determined by the manner in which those tools are implemented and used.

2. Literature on the Subject

The research that has been published on the most important aspect of remote work – its effectiveness (efficiency, productivity, performance) – is extensive and well documented, particularly regarding the pandemic. At the same time, the results of research taken as a whole frequently seem inconclusive.

For example, a study by Farooq and Sultana (2022) conducted on the hotel, banking and IT industries indicates that employees were less efficient working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another paper on full-time employees working remotely in public and private organisations shows that the fear of COVID-19 was positively correlated with higher levels of productivity and engagement during remote work (Galanti *et al.* 2021). Similar (apparent) inconsistencies may be found in research on relationships and communication. Such research shows that although employees considered it easy to adapt to remote work, major diffi-

¹ This selection was dictated by an analysis of remote work conditions that were the subject of other studies.

culties were reported with respect to professional interactions and communication with colleagues as well as the lack of resources related to infrastructure (internet, printers), reconciling remote work with family life/household chores, and time/schedule management (Tavares *et al.* 2021). Alongside reduced motivation and an inability to unplug after working hours, the difficulty of communicating with colleagues and cooperating were identified as the greatest challenges of remote work (Routley 2020).

Other challenges include higher levels of perceived workload, employees struggling to manage tasks and social isolation (Mierzejewska & Chomicki 2020, Wei, Wang & Yu 2022). Task interdependence was found to play a crucial role, significantly mitigating the correlation between the increased scope of remote work and social isolation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the former not only led to greater social isolation among employees (Kakkar *et al.* 2022), but it also weakened their identification with the organisation (Kossen & van der Berg 2022).

A review of the literature on assessments of the broadly defined effectiveness reveals that a significant portion of research has focused on the relationships between productivity, engagement and stress (Galanti *et al.* 2021). Employee productivity and satisfaction with remote work are largely determined by task types and work environment. An organisation's overall performance can be improved if it adopts a more flexible approach to remote work while internal policies and support from top management play a key role in implementing remote work principles (Chatterjee, Chaudhuri & Vrontis 2022). On the one hand, low-quality relationships with colleagues (in terms of the sense of belonging, professional relations and support) are listed among factors leading to employee reluctance to work remotely (Yang *et al.* 2022). On the other hand, limited interactions with co-workers cause fewer disruptions at work (Wöhrmann & Ebner 2021).

Another important group of studies focuses on differences in how employee characteristics effect how effectiveness is perceived and remote work is assessed. For example, the quality of the atmosphere with colleagues and managers in the workplace is a more important factor for rejecting remote work offers by single people than by those living in couples and with families (Mergener & Trübner 2022). Similarly, the impact of remote work on employee productivity was found to be more significant in women than in men (Farooq & Sultana 2022). Meanwhile the perception of productivity may vary depending on the age of employees (Robak 2022) or the age of managers (Camp, Young & Bushardt 2022). In terms of demographics, the perception of low productivity was correlated with employee age (the older the cohort, the more likely they were to see remote work as unproductive). This can perhaps be explained by difficulties that older employees may have with new technology and their possible lower adaptability to change, particularly in the conditions of enforced remote working (Galanti *et al.* 2021). Moreover, some factors

influencing performance vary by industry and/or type of activity (ex. Siejka & Szajt 2022).

These observations, including the contradictions, suggest the need for caution when seeking to generalise similar findings and recommendations, and call for an individual approach². It is also why I have chosen to base this study on inductive reasoning.

3. Results – Employee Opinion Survey and Interviews

For this paper, an employee opinion survey was used as the principal research method, with the resulting scores further evaluated based on structured interviews with managers. Similar methods have been used by other researchers (Lis, Ptak & Lis 2021, Kakkar *et al.* 2022, Robak 2022). Computed-Assisted Web Interviews (CAWI) were conducted with 500 respondents (employees of companies with international capital) who had worked in the office (on-site in the company) before March 2020 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then remotely between March 2020 and May 2021, as required by their employer. The sample was selected based on data from 2019: the number of employees in Poland (16,467,000) and the share of office workers among them (6.5%), the number of employees of companies with foreign capital (2,083), assuming an error of confidence (0.05). Non-probability sampling was applied, with such factors as company size and gender taken into account.

The statistical analysis was conducted in Statistica. Pearson's chi-square and maximum-likelihood chi-square tests were used to verify statistical significance. In addition, whenever statistical significance was found, Cramér's V was also calculated and interpreted (a similar analysis was conducted, for example, by Beňo, Hvorecký and Šimúth (2021), who studied the relationship between employee monitoring software and the individual characteristics of respondents).

Respondents were asked the following question: How have technology and the tools you have available influenced the following aspects of your work? (see Fig. 1 for aggregated results and Table 1 for selected results of the analysis).

According to respondents (A0), the technology and tools available had the most significant positive impact on innovation (median, dominant of 4, average score of 3.62, indicating a slight improvement). With an average score of 3.43 (median, dominant of 4), work organisation was also enhanced. Tasks (task performance efficiency, scope of responsibilities) and employee performance were scored at 3.39 (median, dominant of 3) and therefore ranked third. In contrast, aspects related to communication and relationships had the lowest scores (3.14 and 3.08, respectively;

² This issue is addressed by the author in the article (Wojtkowiak, Skowron-Mielnik & Gołembski 2022).

median, dominant of 3) and remained unchanged for a significant percentage of respondents.

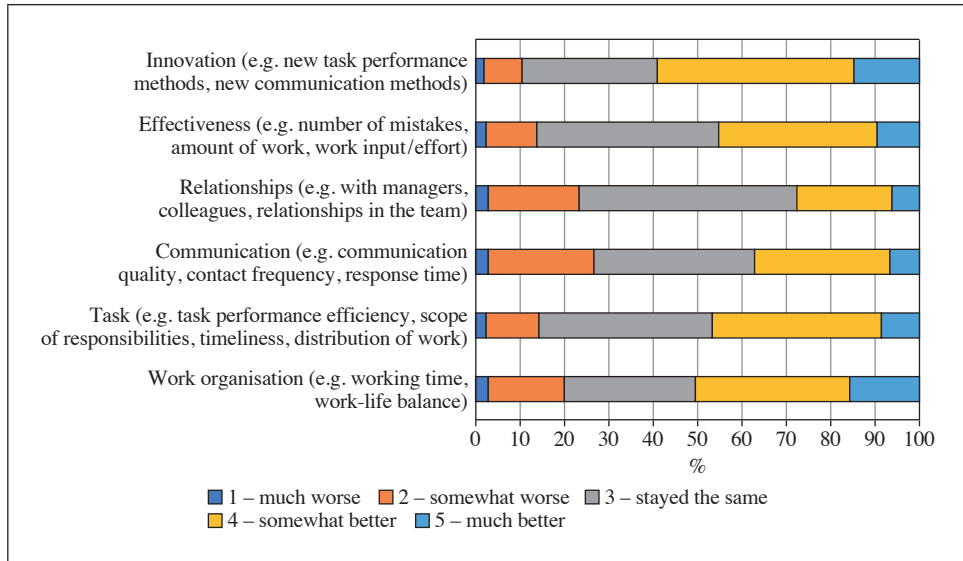


Fig. 1. Distribution of Answers to the Question: How Have the Technology and Tools Available Influenced the Following Aspects of Your Work?

Source: the author.

Statistical significance was found and confirmed with two tests for employment arrangement (full-time/part-time employment) and tasks; however, the relationship was weak. Interestingly, part-time employees rated the impact of remote work tools on task performance methods much lower. One of the tests (Pearson's chi-square) confirmed the relationship between employment arrangement and communication and innovation, but the relationship between these variables was very weak. In this case, part-time employee scores for task performance efficiency (A1) and distribution of work were also much lower.

The scores pertaining to the model of work (at the time of the survey) are just as important for hybrid work. A low statistical significance was confirmed (with two tests) for tasks and innovation, with the impact of remote work tools on both areas rated higher by people working in a hybrid model during the study (A2).

Another relationship (albeit a weak one) was found between the duration of remote work in the pandemic and tasks, communication, and effectiveness. Significant differences were observed for tasks, with task performance efficiency assessed more critically by people with less experience with remote work. In the overall

assessment of the impact on effectiveness and communication, the lowest scores were reported for employees whose experience of remote work was the shortest. Given the lack of strong and consistent relationships, no conclusion can be generalised; however, it is because of this lack of consistency with regards to the relationship between the duration of remote work and assessment of impact, for example, on innovation, that caution is called for when implementing remote work (A3).

Table 1. Data Analysis – Selected Results

Specification	Employment arrangement (full-time/ part-time)	Current work model	Duration of remote work in the pandemic	Position
Work organisation (e.g. working time, work-life balance)				
ML Chi-squared	9.30970	12.51119	22.75636	6.05174
Cramér's V	0.15532	0.11205	0.12363	0.10872
Tasks (e.g. task performance efficiency, scope of responsibilities, timeliness, division of work)				
ML Chi-squared	16.78845	29.93476	30.81054	17.04831
Cramér's V	0.26979	0.17331	0.14684	0.18387
Communication (e.g. communication quality, contact frequency, response time)				
ML Chi-squared	9.72002	6.27077	26.71954	1.65897
Cramér's V	0.17940	0.08226	0.13457	0.05737
Relationships (e.g. with managers, colleagues, relationships in the team)				
ML Chi-squared	5.32247	11.53938	11.01574	12.30680
Cramér's V	0.11372	0.10309	0.08503	0.15667
Effectiveness (e.g. number of mistakes, amount of work, work input/effort)				
ML Chi-squared	2.70224	13.14336	32.28669	4.41741
Cramér's V	0.07777	0.11211	0.14378	0.09438
Innovation (e.g. new task performance methods, new communication methods)				
ML Chi-squared	8.96325	32.00597	16.57006	3.36227
Cramér's V	0.17156	0.17385	0.10655	0.08193
	IT Support		Personal skills	
Spearman's ρ	0.2886054	$t = 6.7267$	0.3367094	$t = 7.9799$
Kendall's tau- b and tau- c	$b = 0.2560263$	$c = 0.2161900$	$b = 0.3013467$	$c = 0.2506700$

Source: the author.

Although not strong, a statistical relationship was also found and confirmed with two tests between the respondent's workplace and tasks. The size of the town/city where the respondent lived had a statistically significant effect on communication

and tasks, as did the respondent's financial situation, on communication (though the latter observation exceeds the purview and purpose of this analysis).

These responses were compared with regards to the question: What do you think could contribute to a better use of technology/tools available in remote work? Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and Kendall's tau-*b* were used to verify relationships between the responses. Based on the former, a statistically significant relationship was found between the selection of tools, IT support and personal skills and innovation; however, the strength of this relationship (which was positive in each case) was low. The latter coefficient (Kendall's tau-*b*) indicated the strongest relationship between innovation and personal skills.

In terms of the distribution of responses for these variables, it was found that the respondents who thought that personal skills could contribute to a better use of technology/tools available in remote work (responses: "strongly agree" and "agree") assessed their innovation levels as somewhat better (50% of responses) or the same (24% of responses) (A4), with a further 17% describing it as much better thanks to remote work technology/tools.

The comparisons for other aspects revealed even lower levels of relationships between the variables, with many of them showing no linear relationship. Consequently, they were not interpreted in detail.

To confront employees' assessments with those of managers', interviews were conducted in person with 14 middle and senior managers responsible for the management of teams working remotely for companies with international capital. Respondents were selected based on the criteria of knowledge, experience and availability. They were presented with the results of employee questionnaires and asked to comment on these results by sharing their opinions, experience and practices. During the coding of the interview contents, the following employee management tools and methods (good practices) were identified (listed below in no particular order):

Innovation (B1). In terms of innovation, sceptical statements prevailed. The majority of respondents were "surprised" to see employees rank innovation so highly. They pointed out that "employees may be confused as to what constitutes innovation and what signifies a regular use of the currently available options", and that some "have only just discovered [the existence of] USB flash drives".

In parallel, enforced remote working accelerated the digitalisation of office work, forcing employees to develop their skills (and employers to train their staff). The respondents also noted that with work entering their homes, employees had more space for "jotting down ideas over a cup of coffee on the terrace". Trust in employees, alongside the use of project work methods, was also considered an important determinant of innovation.

Effectiveness (B2). Comments related to the effectiveness scores were also divided but not contradictory. Questioning the improvement in effectiveness, some managers pointed out that too many employees could simulate work, with their effectiveness verified as low only after some time.

In contrast, managers indicated that the elimination of “bureaucratic waste” and a better use of, for example, meeting time were benefits. Managers of employees who were better prepared for remote work (had higher levels of digitalisation) emphasised that it allowed their organisations to achieve an advantage and distinguish themselves in the market.

The key recommendation was to change the approach to performance assessments. Instead, making work accountable – by way of identifying measurable scopes of responsibilities – was indicated as a prerequisite for success. While this forced managers to enhance their control and organisational functions, some pointed out that in fact they simplified their control measures and emphasised increased performance.

Despite these recommendations, in addition to other original solutions, managers agreed that excessive focus on efficiency in enforced remote working took a toll on the staff’s mental capacity.

Work organisation (B3). From the perspective of managers, while widely differing opinions were reported, it was the organisational aspects of work that underwent the most profound changes. The managers said that, given the individual nature of work, they doubted that, in the long term, remote work (from home) and private life could be reconciled, as there are too many conflicts. At the same time, they alluded to a number of organisational solutions that can enhance traditional work processes.

Among the organisational changes that had either already been implemented or were recommended in the interviews, such solutions included those related to the organisation of power (requirements for the managers themselves):

- changing the mentality of managers (including senior management) and have greater trust in employees and their ability to self-organise; this recommendation would need to be balanced against calls for increased work accountability,
- ensuring that middle and line managers responsible for performance have autonomy in how their work is organised,
- extended greater autonomy to employees,
- implementing work frameworks based on, for example, project management methods,
- promoting a bottom-up approach to decision-making.

A number of other recommendations and solutions referred specifically to organisational issues, in particular:

- precisely planning of work and projects,

- distributing tasks among employees,
- implementing virtual organisation solutions (dynamic teams),
- appointing leaders for larger teams,
- solutions for organising meetings (setting meeting agenda, leader and objectives),
- more flexibility, particularly when adapting plans (working time and type of tasks) to the character and working conditions of the individual,
- more flexibility in the daily arrangement of working time, development of methods and rules of work outside the working hours as well as its logging,
- ensuring space (time, conditions, communication channels) for maintaining relationships.

Communication and relationships (B4). The last organisational recommendation emerges as a direct response to problems related to communication and relationships. This is also where both employees (in surveys) and managers (in interviews) agreed with each other. The overall score indicated communication difficulties and a deterioration in relations that increased the stress and dissatisfaction levels among employees (regardless of other conditions of remote work). Problems were reported with switching teams, new members joining a team, building new relationships or expanding on existing ones. Our respondents highlighted the difficulty of maintaining relationships remotely for a longer time.

At the same time, while many processes of communication, data and information exchange improved with time (in some cases even compared to traditional models of work), the lack of informal (work-related) relations affected the functioning of both individuals and teams.

4. Discussion

While some of the managers' recommendations (e.g. those calling for a more precise distribution of tasks or the use of project management methods) may seem familiar and even obvious, remote work nonetheless provided a context in which their actual applicability could be verified.

Many of the managers' proposed solutions are seemingly contradictory – for example, combining trust (B1) and autonomy (B3) with a requirement for work accountability (B2). Nevertheless, managers' practical recommendations seem to be consistent with those put forward by many authors. For example, autonomy and self-leadership (B1) have a positive relationship with productivity and work engagement (Galanti *et al.* 2021). Similarly, an enterprise's attitude to remote work has a positive impact on the remote work itself, the control of remote work (B2) and the support of remote work (Pokojski, Kister & Lipowski 2022).

The relationships and apparent contradictions suggest that the population of employees studied is heterogeneous (A3). For example, higher scores for effective-

ness were reported for employees who continued to work remotely after the lockdowns (A2). At the same time, lower scores for the impact of tools on communication and relationships confirm the managers' observations (B4) (cf. Moczyłowska 2021).

Another important finding concerned the differences in the perception of individual aspects of effectiveness (mainly effectiveness itself, task performance efficiency and innovation) between employees (A0) and managers (B1, B2) commenting on the assessments of the former. The reasons for these differences include:

- employees' perceptions of effectiveness and innovation actually differ from those of managers (Big InfoMonitor 2021),
- managers are more performance-oriented and more critical of reality,
- managers do not trust their staff (Houghton 2021); at the same time, a number of factors present in remote work could help preserve or disrupt trust within the organisation (Panteli *et al.* 2023).

Despite the potential differences in the interpretation of innovation (B1), the results are consistent in the assessment of the impact of employees' own skills on innovation (A4) and their intention to develop individual skills (B1). This finding may serve as an important practical recommendation (Krasnova 2021).

Based on the relationships detected and comments made regarding the use of tools for the development of various aspects of remote work, an attempt was made to distinguish key variables for managers (see the graph in Fig. 2). They concern:

- 1) work programming (rules, principles, control, KPIs),
- 2) ensuring autonomy (freedom in organising work and decision-making, ensuring trust), while emphasising:
 - maintaining relationships (including effective communication),
 - employees' own skills.

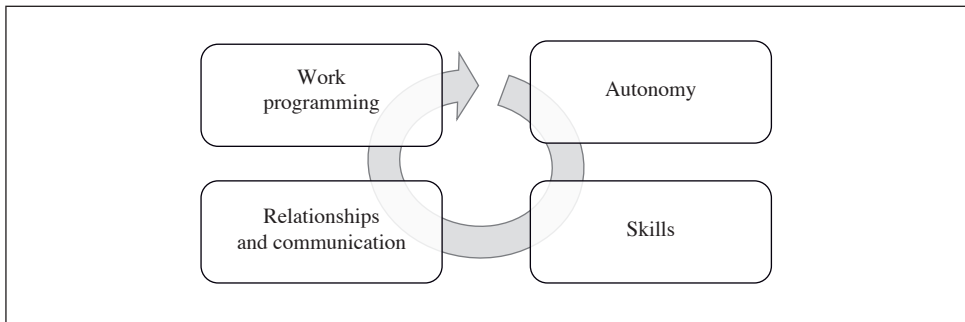


Fig. 2. Graphical Representation of the Proposed Selection of Key Management Variables in Remote Work

Source: the author.

The relationships between the respective factors can be multidirectional. For example, skills are the basis of autonomy as well as the comfort of managers in ensuring freedom under the established rules. The rules of instant messaging or skills in the use of tools enabling remote cooperation are equally necessary.

This approach is consistent with findings of other authors. Research on leadership practices in remote work during the pandemic reveals that managers were more relationship-oriented (B4) than task-oriented, while the right choice of tools played an important role in leadership (Chaudhuri *et al.* 2022, Krehl & Büttgen 2022). In addition, both external (technological competence) (B1) and internal factors (work flexibility, attitude, perceived behaviour control) were found to be significant predictors of successful remote work (Ng, Lit & Cheung 2022). Similarly, how a company and its employees are managed, managers' approach to performance assessment and adapting the support to employees' actual needs are argued to play a fundamental role in the assessment of remote work (Urbaniec, Małkowska & Włodarkiewicz-Klimek 2022).

5. Conclusion

Given the apparent paradoxes and contradictions, an important recommendation can be made for researchers of remote work and a hybrid future: An individual approach and caution are advised when formulating conclusions. This will significantly limit the interpretation of research, particularly with respect to relatively weak relationships such as those indicated in the present statistical analysis. However, the main variables, including the seemingly contradictory work programming and autonomy, should meet the condition for enabling more general recommendations in the form of directions or options.

An important conclusion contributing to knowledge on managing remote work is that employees and managers perceive effectiveness and task performance efficiency differently. At the same time, managers' awareness of employees' opinions is vital.

Future research should analyse the foundations for the differences in the perception of effectiveness and innovation between employees and managers, as well as the lack of trust in positive results in this area. While remote work and tools may improve employees' skills, they also reduce managers' control over work processes. Given the deterioration of relationships and communication, the latter can have a negative impact on the overall performance of the organisation and can lead to undesirable effects both in terms of work processes and employee well-being.

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