

THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF REMOTE WORKING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG EMPLOYEES

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Abstract: This paper explores how remote work is perceived by young employees. On the basis of literature review, pilot study was undertaken (sample Olson, 1983, DeSanctis, 1984, Bailey, and Kurland, 2002; Madsen, 2011; Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon, 2013). The results of the pilot study undertaken in Poland confirmed literature findings. It turned out that the most important for young remote workers are: flexible working hours and saving time on commuting to work. The main disadvantages of remote work include: difficulty in separating home affairs from the professional ones, social isolation and greater organizational requirements. The results of pilot study proved that other benefits and drawbacks are irrelevant. An interesting phenomenon is that in the age of social networking and extensive communication tools the second disadvantage of remote working for young remote workers is the risk of social isolation.

Keywords: remote work, remote workers, work organization, employment policy, employees, telework

1. Introduction

The revolution, both in communication and technology, has brought about changes in every aspect of social life. The Internet has become the basis of a new economy, characterized by the importance of globalization and information technology. The effects of the above changes are also noticeable on the labour market. It is influenced by the constant modification of both lifestyle and work habits (Zalega, 2002).

The phenomenon of remote work was considered already in the 80's, but it seems that this topic is just gaining importance nowadays. Increasing number of occupations require only such tools as phone and computer with Internet access, which results in decreasing necessity of traditional offices. This trend raises the question of whether there is a likelihood that with time remote work will completely replace the traditional types of work.

Obviously, this study considers mainly office occupations and mental works such as: accounting, legal services, finance, computer graphics, editorial work, copywriting,

translation, PR services, etc. For obvious reasons, a typical physical work is not a topic of deliberation.

The exploratory research was carried out in order to identify key issues of working remotely from employees' (especially young people's) point of view.

2. Literature review

2.1. Characteristics and definitions of remote work

Most studies on telework and remote work focus on the individual, primarily the teleworker, and occasionally the teleworker's supervisor or a non-teleworking colleague (Bailey, and Kurland, 2002). It should also be noted that a large number of key remote jobs studies were conducted around the 90s. Although it has been years since, these publications must be the basis for further consideration in this subject. The significant achievements and values that they brought to the study at that time cannot be ignored. That is why the first part of the discussion on defining remote work is based mainly on the considerations and conclusions of that period.

The first references to the phenomenon of remote work in the source literature can be found already in 1983. The definition of remote work, as quoted by M.H. Olson, is as follows (Olson, 1983, p. 182): "remote work refers to organizational work that is performed outside the normal organizational confines of space and time". Her research on "remote office work" as well as subsequent publications has largely become the basis for other researchers' deliberations. Sixteen years later, another authors wrote: "More and more organizations are forming teams that are not co-located" (Veinott et al., 1999, pp. 302-309). Although it has been a long time since then, these words seem to be still valid and even more intensified nowadays.

There are many synonyms related to remote work. These are, among others: telework, telecommuting, work at home, home-work. These words are often used interchangeably, but it is important to know the possible differences between definitions.

According to the European Commission report, telework is a work done for the employer or client using telecommunications and information technology, mainly in a place other than the traditional place of work (company seat; Kurkus-Rozowska, and Konarska, 2002). Teleworking is most often associated with a flexible and modern form of work organization (Skowron-Mielnik, 2001). In Poland, the definition of telework is stated by the Labour Code¹, which attributes telework to three main characteristics: regularity, work outside the workplace, and work with electronic means of communication (in particular,

¹ Art. 67 Ustawy z dnia 26 czerwca 1974 r. Kodeks pracy (DzU. 1974, nr 24, poz. 141).

to pass on the results of work). On this basis it can be stated that teleworking is in some way a kind of remote work and its main feature is the use of technology. On the other hand, remote work as such does not have to rely on its use. S. Madsen cites another definition formulated by Jack Nilles for telework: "defined it as «any form of substitution of information technologies for work-related travel»". (Madsen, 2011, p. 149). Remote jobs allow the employee to work on their own time instead of having set office hours.

It is worth noting that in the case of teleworking, the form of employment (employment contract, civil law agreement) is of little importance as the aspect of flexibility regards the organization of work rather than employment (Skowron-Mielnik, 2001). This issue is extremely important because many people confuse the two issues. The same regards remote work itself.

Theoretically, telecommuting is also a kind of remote work. It is characterized by being made from home (Staples, 2001). Often interchanged with the term 'work at home' or 'home-work' (Hill et al., 1996). On the other hand, S. Madsen, in reference to the definition of 1999 (according to N.B. Fairweather) explained that telecommuting uses information and communication technologies to bring work to the worker (Madsen, 2011). A key issue in telecommuting is the management of employees who are located remotely from their manager (Staples, 2001).

In the source literature (e.g. Staples, 2001; Madsen, 2011) there are many definitions of the same concepts. It is hard to find differences between specific terms, especially when they are broadly used interchangeably. For example, some research use terms 'teleworking' and 'telecommuting' interchangeably assuming that telework is preferred by Europeans while telecommuting is preferred in the United States (Madsen, 2011).

On the other hand, the phrase "work from home" generally refers to a different kind of job. Often, those who work from home own their own business. For instance, someone who works from home could operate an in-home jewelry business, hair salon, or daycares center. Whereas, working remotely is sometimes called as "work from anywhere", which is why this description is not suitable for work from home.

In Author's opinion the term "remote work" is the broadest and least strict definition of the described phenomenon.

2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of remote work – literature review

The times when communication was only possible between people physically present in the same place are long gone. Of course, not only have the means of communication changed (for instance video conferences replaced audio conferencing, the scan largely replaced fax), but also its quality improved significantly (undeniable improvement in the quality of transferred files, images, sounds, etc.). Interestingly, already over a dozen years ago research has proved that the quality of a work realized remotely by a group of people (with the use of video communication) is comparable to that of face-to-face working team. The use of audio

communication only gives slightly worse results (Olson et al., 1995; Veinott et al., 1999). At this point it is worth pointing out that in today's world there is a wide range of communication tools available to provide the workers with not only the ability to send audio and video, but also to simultaneously work on the same file in real time with another co-worker (for example: Google Docs). Therefore, distance contact is no longer as complicated as it was a dozen or so years ago. Some authors confirm, that even for some collaborative task, being able to share screens on a computer (or sharing the same data in the same time) might provide sufficient visual space to improve communication (Karsenty, 1999). However, the subject of the effectiveness of specific tools (audio, video, mail, programs) seems to require deeper considerations.

Growing number of companies give employees the opportunity to work (for a few days in per week or per month) in a so-called "home office" mode. It seems highly likely that this trend will continue. Sometimes the remote mode of the work depends on the characteristics of the occupation itself and can only be implemented in a percentage of all duties. Moreover recruitment agencies report approximately 85 per cent of those seeking work indicate they would be more likely to stay with their employer if working flexibly was available (Twentyman, 2010; Grant et al., 2013).

In order to work at home it is necessary to show strong motivation and self-discipline (Olson et al., 1995). Remote work is primarily characterized by: minimum physical fitness requirements and maximum concentration requirements, individual control over the pace of work (which often arises from the project-based nature of the task), well-defined milestones (easily divided and measured; Olson et al., 1995). Therefore, for people who are taking care for small children or are physically disabled, working from home is often the only type of employment they can afford. So this work is chosen both for personal preferences and because of the lack of alternatives.

Commonly mentioned advantages of remote work include: schedule flexibility, freedom from interruptions, and time saved in commuting (DeSanctis, 1984). But studies of remote work indicate that travel reduction is not a major inducement for this work (Bailey, and Kurland, 2002). To the benefits of working remotely one may also include meeting family requirements or the desire to reduce social contact (Olson et al., 1995). Working from home also means flexible working hours or less formal atmosphere (Olson et al., 1995). Home-based workers also report high levels of satisfaction (Wheatley, 2012). Some research revealed the perception of greater productivity due to remote work (Hill et al., 1998). But results of study indicate that the telecommuting environmental effects may have positive implications on productivity of creative tasks but negative implications on productivity of dull tasks (Dutcher, 2012). However, it is difficult to calculate productivity with the differences in the type and amount of telework, the family situation of the employee and even the work environment (Madsen, 2011). Polish authors point out that remote work allows the worker for

better control over workplace conditions (for example: temperature, furniture, music) to suit their needs (Makowiec, and Bober, 2008).

S. Madsen presents the whole list of benefits, which is a great summary for other studies, completing the arguments above. The benefits include: avoidance of office politics, better work/family balance, flexibility to relocate, improved: morale, productivity, quality of life and work life, increased: autonomy, family and leisure time, job satisfaction, technical skills, less: distractions, spillover; lower stress level, more community ties, saves money on gas and parking (Madsen, 2011). In Poland also such advantages as the elimination of unproductive meetings, a greater privacy zone and the ability to use the necessary office tools (scanner, printer, etc.) on their own are noticeable (Madsen, 2011).

It is worth noting that the "performance" of an employer working remotely is less visible (Bailey, and Kurland, 2002). Co-workers find it harder to see the amount of work and effort put on a job by the employee, and the time spent on work. Even if a person has been working for a long time on a particular matter, they may not receive a benefit proportionate to those they would have received from a supervisor in traditional work where the effort would have been noticed and appreciated (Bailey, and Kurland, 2000).

Interestingly, remote working can increase 'available' time for other activities. However, extra time is not always spent on rest or leisure activities because it is filled with household chores or other paid work. Research by D. Wheatley (Wheatley, 2012) suggests that it can be argued that time saved may in some cases, be redirected to more work as opposed to recuperation (Grant et al., 2013). In fact, remote work can cause increased longer work hours (Hill et al., 1998).

Additionally professional and social isolation are among the factors cited as drawbacks of remote work (DeSanctis, 1984; Bailey, and Kurland, 2002). This type of work reduces social networking. It also makes the employee less noticeable in their industry. Equally important is the social status, which, to some extent, may result from owning one's own office. Remote work reduces the sense of social status (Makowiec, and Bober, 2008).

Some research reported also that employee's families struggled because workplace and schedule flexibility blurred the boundaries between work and family life (Hill et al., 1998; Harpaz, 2002). It should also be mentioned that the disadvantage of working remotely from home can be the difficulty in separating home affairs from the professional duties during the day (Lorenz, 2011). Polish literature indicates also such disadvantages as: higher requirements for work organization, increased data security problem (for some professions), limited non-verbal communication (noteworthy in negotiations), lack of participation in corporate culture (excluding work in virtual organizations; Makowiec, and Bober, 2008). There is a risk that remote work may lead to workaholism, but no study confirms this hypothesis.

To sum up, research suggests that there are positive and negative factors associated with remote working for the employees. Even though there is growing awareness of the possible

negative effects of remote working, this area of research is still developing (Grant et al., 2013).

3. Pilot study – assumptions, questions, methodology, results

Various authors define differently the age range to which young workers can be classified. Some studies include people between 18 and 26 years of age (Feij et al., 1999), other extend this range up to 30 years (Kujala et al., 2005). Concerning the concept of "young people" the literature of the subject classifies people up to 24 years of age to this group (Gore et al., 2011; Furlong, and Cartmel, 2006). The Author of this paper is inclined to describe young workers as people up to 30 years of age. This group includes those who undertook work immediately after high school, people working and studying, and employers who have graduated relatively recently (within 5-6 years).

The purpose of previous review was to explore the literature related to remote work (especially about definitions and the benefits and drawback of working remotely). In this section the Author wants to formulate the study questions.

Based on the analyzed literature, several study questions arise.

1. Which benefits of this form of work are most important to young remote workers?
2. Which disadvantages of remote work is most burdensome for young remote workers?
3. Whether the advantages and disadvantages of remote work described in the foreign source literature will be confirmed by a pilot study in Poland?

In order to respond to the above study questions, a pilot study was conducted in which the participation was voluntary. The Author prepared a survey questionnaire, which was addressed to remote workers aged between 18 and 30 (according to the assumptions). The study lasted two weeks during which period 100 respondents took part in it. The questionnaire was distributed online and shared mostly on student's forums. It should be clearly stated that it was only a pilot study.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts; the first part identified age and sex of respondents, the second one referred to the advantages and disadvantages of remote work. The results of the questionnaire relate to identified positive and negative characteristics of remote work.

Based on a review of literature, the Author has chosen 7 the most important advantages of remote work, which are:

- time saving on commuting to work,
- flexible working hours,
- less formal atmosphere,
- ability to have influence on a workplace (music, room temperature, furnishings),

- independence,
- the ability to work for people with disabilities or mothers bringing up children,
- absence of supervisor in the workplace.

Each respondent had to choose max. 3 the most important advantages from the list or add a category not mentioned above.

Similarly to the previous question, according to the literature, only 5 the most important disadvantages of remote work were selected (this amount is relatively fewer due to the fact that there is less disadvantages described in the literature). These are:

- social isolation,
- greater organization skills requirement,
- lack of participation in corporate culture,
- risk of losing professional contacts
- difficulty in separating home affairs from professional ones.

As previously, each respondent had to choose max. 3 the most important disadvantages from the list or add a category not mentioned above.

3.1. Characteristics of the research sample

The respondents are people aged 18 to 30 (according to the assumptions) who are remote workers. The distribution of participants in the study by sex and age is presented in the tables below (Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1.

Sex distribution of the respondents

Sex	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Woman	68	68
Man	32	32
Total	100	100

Source: On the basis of surveys' results.

Table 2.

Age distribution of the respondents

Sex	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
18-24 years	56	56
25-30 years	44	44
Total	100	100

Source: On the basis of surveys' results.

It is worth noting that 68% of respondents are women and only 32% are men, which could impact the results. A significant proportion of respondents (over ½) are over 18, but less than 25 years old. The Author may reveal that most of these respondents are between 23-24 years old.

3.2. Results

The results of the pilot study relate to advantages of remote work are as follows:

- flexible working hours 80%,
- time saving on commuting to work 56%,
- ability to have influence on a workplace (music, room temperature, furnishings),
- independence 28%,
- the ability to work for people with disabilities or mothers bringing up children 8%,
- absence of supervisor in the workplace 8%,
- other 8%,
- less formal atmosphere 4%.

Flexible working hours were included in the most popular benefits (80% of the respondents), as well as saving time for commuting (56% of the respondents). Nearly one third of the respondents pointed out ability to have influence on a workplace (music, room temperature, furnishings).

The absence of supervisor in the workplace and self-reliance was not much important as well as the ability to work for people with disabilities or mothers bringing up children. Only 4% of respondents mark less formal atmosphere which was the least importance for young workers in the case of remote work. Several people have pointed to other benefits including those coming from the possibility of their own rhythm of work, and also the lack of co-workers who can create distractions.

Owing to this it can be concluded that only the first 3 factors are important, the rest are marginal.

The results of the pilot study relate to disadvantages of remote work are as follows:

- difficulty in separating home affairs from professional ones 68%,
- social isolation 48%,
- greater organization skills requirement 44%,
- risk of losing professional contacts 20%,
- other 12%,
- lack of participation in corporate culture 4%.

The most common shortcomings of remote work are: difficulties in separating home affairs from professional ones (68% of respondents). Of comparative importance for young workers were social isolation (48% of respondents) and greater organization skills requirement (44% of respondents). The lack of participation in the corporate culture was the least importance for young workers.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to suggest their own response. For additional drawbacks, several respondents suggested difficulties in contact with co-workers, as well as a constant feeling of being at work and possible remorse during rest and recovery caused by the failure to perform all duties to the end.

4. Summary

The results of the pilot study confirm some of the main advantages of the remote work found in the literature: flexible working hours, saving time on commuting to work, ability to have influence on workplace (music, room temperature, furnishings). On the other hand, the main disadvantages include: difficulty in separating home affairs from the professional affairs, social isolation and greater organization skills requirement.

On the basis of the obtained results a conclusion can be drawn that providing flexible working hours in the case of office work to young workers should improve their work comfort and satisfaction. This is one of the main factors that would encourage people to agree for remote work. It seems that this is due to the changing lifestyle and attitude towards work.

Due to the choice of target group as young remote workers, only 8% of respondents chose as an advantage of remote work opportunities for people with disabilities or mothers bringing up children. This situation occurred even despite the fact that the study group consisted mostly of women. The Author claims that the results would look very different if they were performed on a group of people aged 30-50 years.

Studies do not show that self-reliance significantly influences the desire to work remotely.

An interesting phenomenon is that in the age of social networking and extensive communication tools the second disadvantage of remote working for young remote workers is the risk of social isolation. This phenomenon is quite astonishing and may indicate that young people appreciate the face-to-face contact in the workplace, and also prefer to work together with their co-workers, even though there are countless tools to communicate remotely.

Although Author's conclusions are limited, they illustrate the young employee point of view on remote working.

Obviously, there is no way that at the present moment remote work would completely supplant traditional forms of work. However, this form of work should be seen as one of the many mechanisms developed to meet the demands of a modern working environment. And a large number of people interested in remote work should be the basis for drawing practical conclusions for employers.

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