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Ebner, Christine; Brandstätter, Peter Harald; Schmidthaler, Michael

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The Future of Work: Remote Work as the New Normal?

Christine Ebner

University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, School of Management, Austria
christine.ebner@fh-steyr.at

Peter Harald Brandstätter

University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, School of Management, Austria
peter.brandstaetter@fh-steyr.at

Michael Schmidthaler

University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, School of Management, Austria
michael.schmidthaler@fh-steyr.at

Abstract. During the SARS-CoV-19 pandemic, normal work routines were abruptly upended and social distancing as a major tactic to defeat the crisis has required people to work from home. Remote working has become a new normal for many employees. This article and the conducted empirical study focus on the employees' point of view and the perceptions and experiences during the demanding pandemic. This contribution thus aims at shedding light on the motivational factors for telework, on the observed benefits and challenges of distant work as well as on the human resource implications of these developments. The article draws upon an empirical study (n=1074) conducted in Austria in the summer of 2020. Various factors and their effect on the desire to work from home were analyzed. Among these are factors such as respondents' age (not sign.), gender (female respondents are found to have less desire for working from home, $\beta=-0.07^{**}$), the presence of flexible working hours ($\beta=0.07^{**}$), time spent working with PC ($\beta=0.21^{***}$) as well as various other work related and socio-demographic aspects. Working from home is more than just a form of flexible working intensified by the SARS-CoV-19 crisis. The desire for remote work is forced by the distance to the workplace and the reported positive effects of working concentrated and undisturbed. These aspects seem to outweigh the negative ones in this study as well, yet the lack of social contacts shows a significant disadvantage to be overcome. In summary, working from home is perceived positively by employees and companies are encouraged to promote these opportunities in the future.

Keywords: digitalization, telework, remote work, motivational factors, SARS-CoV-19 pandemic

1 Introduction

Remote working, also referred to as teleworking, telecommuting, distributed work, or flexible work arrangement (Allen et al. 2015), can be defined as the flexible performance of activities of the employing organization from a remote virtual location and outside the office or the production facilities. The worker has no personal contact with other co-workers but is able to communicate with them through the utilization of technological tools (Wang et al. 2020; Di Martino and Wirth 1990).

Regardless of which term is used, there are three elements that characterize telework: the temporal and spatial dimensions and the supportive use and role of technologies (ICTs) (Kerrin and Hone 2001). Employees are not tied to a specific location when performing their work and this is achieved by the use of new networking technologies and methods of communications. The time spent working remotely can vary between irregularly or occasionally to always (Hynes 2016).

Over the past decades, due to advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and due to greater availability of high-speed internet in households all over the world, remote working has been enabled and increased its share in the total workforce (Messenger and Gschwind 2016). The number of jobs tied to a fixed location is becoming smaller and smaller (Golden, Veiga and Dino 2008). With the increasing professional use of smart devices and mobile internet access in almost all places, almost everywhere, the normalisation of working outside the office can be observed (Holtgrewe 2014). Studies have shown that labor outside the workplace is a win-win-situation for all stakeholders, such as employees, employers and societies to gain positive effects (Bailey and Kurland 2002).

1.1 Remote working before and during the SARS-CoV-19 Pandemic

Before the SARS-CoV-19 pandemic remote work was not a widespread element (Kossek and Lautsch 2018). Due to this most workers and companies were not prepared for supporting this way to work. Remote work has been an offer used by higher-income earners and white-collar workers (Eldér 2019). In Europe, for instance, around only two percent of the total number of employees worked mainly remotely in 2015 (Parent-Thirion et al. 2017). Simultaneously, a growing uncertainty over the true necessity of working in presence at the organization's office could be observed both from the organizational as well as from the employees' perspective (Choudhury 2020). Many managers and employees alike constantly questioned the prevailing work dynamics of having to be at the office to perform their usual activities, since many of the technologies that enabled remote working were already available.

Remote working has been associated with increased organizational efficiency and beneficial for both employers and employees. Employers are benefited through a supposedly more productive workforce, that is capable of delivering results using less space and by incurring less costs for the employing organization. Employees benefit from an allegedly better work-life-balance, better job satisfaction and increased organizational commitment (Felstead and Heseke 2017).

During the SARS-CoV-19 pandemic, normal work routines were abruptly upended and social distancing as a major tactic to defeat the crisis has required people to work from home. Millions of people became teleworkers and remote working has become a new normal for many employees (Kniffin et al 2020). Although organizations have been quickly shifting to remote working, the number of workers doing their activities from a remote location still represents a smaller share of the entire workforce (Gourinchas 2020), what can be attributed primarily to the fact of remote work not being suitable for all industries, in particular not for the manufacturing sector (Koirala and Acharya 2020), as well as not suitable for all job positions (Bartik et al. 2020). In a report commissioned by the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2021), it was estimated that 93 percent of all employees globally were at the time living under some form of workplace restriction due to the global situation with regards to the SARS-CoV-19 pandemic and that 8.8 percent of working hours were lost in 2020, which amounted to an equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs being lost.

1.2 Motivational and challenging factors of distance work

At the beginning investigations into the motivation for telework have centered on transportation-related factors, such as the time to commute, the distance, and commute-induced stress. Transportation studies of telework indicate that travel reduction is not a major motivational factor for telework (Salomon and Salomon 1984). In the modern world of work tele-working by using ICTs is seen as way to offer flexibility and consider the well-being of staff, including an improvement of their work-life balance. Employees benefit from enhanced autonomy and the possibility to balance work and non-work commitments through flexible working (Gschwind 2019). The ability to work flexibly and from

different locations without temporal restrictions of office-based hours can reduce also stress levels and increase personal well-being (Grant, Wallace and Spurgeon 2013).

A major motivation for telework is the ability to balance work and family duties (Bailey and Kurland 2002). Teleworking allows some flexibility in arranging work hours around children's routines and providing greater physical accessibility to children compared with employees working in a traditional working scheme. Hilbrecht et al (2013) stressed the change in the opportunities how families organize family and professional life and which entails both parents contributing to daily child care. Teleworkers may be able to concentrate more efficiently on their work and become more productive because they have no distractions and are not involved in organizational politics (Fonner and Roloff 2010). The increase in autonomy when working from home could help employees to meet job-related goals and respond to job demands (Gajendran et al 2015).

Remote technology provides ease of access to work, the effects of this on managing the boundaries between work and personal lives need to be considered (Grant, Wallace and Spurgeon 2013). While telecommuting can help reduce stress, it can also overwork people. Hartig et al (2007) found that teleworker may experience overlap between work and home. This leads to a reduction of restorative effects at home. The challenge of working at home means that the overlap can cause mental health-related problems including over-work because thinking at work may remain after the computer has been switched off.

Social exchange theory has been used by academics to explain the motivations behind workers behaviors and attitudes (Gouldner 1960). It describes the relationship between parties that abide to certain conditions of exchange and generate reciprocity (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). In the context of remote work, in exchange for the greater flexibility, workers would be expected to make sacrifices, such as working outside working hours and putting extra effort (Golden 2007; de Menezes and Kelliher 2011; Elsbach et al. 2012).

Flexible remote working allows more control over the timing of activities, but it also become a source of stress when choices have to be made between numerous of tasks and responsibilities that coexist at home (Tietze and Musson 2005). Maruyama, Hopkinson and James (2009) surveyed the effects of teleworking on work-life balance and the findings showed that gender and having dependents were not significant effects. They found that the teleworkers ability to manage work hours was the most important factor to gain a positive work-life-balance.

Remote working can lead to physical, social and professional isolation. An extensive use of telework may imply less face-to-face interactions with colleagues can increase the feeling out of touch with others in the workplace. Professional isolation among teleworkers may negatively affect job performance (Golden, Veiga and Dino 2008). Social isolation refers to an individual's feelings of lack of inclusion or connectedness to colleagues (Bentley et al 2016). Additionally, if the social need is not fulfilled, perception of isolation will emerge, which can induce a negative influence on engagement among teleworkers (Davis and Cates 2013).

1.3 Research Questions

Even though most of the technologies that enable employees to work from home have existed for a longer time, many organizations had opted not to adopt them, following a trend that existed prior to the pandemic, of more conservative employers and employees not liking the idea of working remotely and considering it as something sub-optimal in comparison to in presence work (Andersen and Kelliher 2020), and also reflecting managerial concerns about possible loss of control and lack of trust with regards to employees not constantly being in sight (Miele and Tirabeni 2020). The pandemic challenged

managers' and companies' creativity and innovation capabilities and promoted important discussions concerning the future of work in many of the affected enterprises. It greatly contributed to the disruption of HR as well as to the faster implementation of the scenarios already expected prior to the pandemic (Hite and McDonald 2020). In our study we focus on the experiences and expectations of employees in order to be able to derive a contribution for the relevance of remote work from the employees' point of view. The following research questions are relevant for us to be able to deduce the future importance and detect fields of action for the integration of remote work into the daily work routines:

- (1) How do employees rate the advantages and disadvantages of remote work?
- (2) Which factors influence the desire for working from home?
- (3) To what extent do employers and employees agree on the desired extent of remote work?

2 Method and Results

The investigation was conducted as an empirical study in cooperation with the department HCM (Human Capital Management) of Business Upper Austria. Limesurvey was used to create and administrate the survey on the internet. The questionnaire was designed to be quick and easy to fill in. In the pre-test, people of different age, gender, education and position in companies were interviewed. The results and suggestions were adapted in the questionnaire. HR-Managers from different sectors were approached by e-mail and asked to forward the questionnaire to their employees. Participants were voluntary and their self-assessment and declaration of experience were relied upon for the study. To participate it was not necessary to have experience with remote work. The survey started in mid-August 2020 and ended at the end of September 2020. Electronic reminders were sent two times to encourage participation. Summarizing the empirics, a total of 1257 people filled out the questionnaire, of which only those who answered all the questions were included in the evaluation (n=1074). Plausibility check and corrections applied to the sample resulted in a pre-cautionary reduction of implausible answers (e.g. age >100a).

The respondents can be described as follows: 53% of the respondents are male and 47% are female, the respondents are very well educated, 21% have A-levels and 62% have also completed their university study and 29% of the respondents work in a leading position. In terms of the most relevant variables – experience with distance work modes, time spent in physical collaboration with peers and time share of total working time spent home, we find that the great majority of respondents spend considerable time working on their personal computer. In particular, respondents working more than 60% of their time on PCs represent 82% of the sample, making it possible to largely divert the place of work to outside office locations.

The analysis of current work situation is provided in table 1. For 2 % of respondents the share of working time currently spent at home exceeds the work at their regular work location. A comparison states a reduction of telework after the CoV-19 lockdown. While 74% of respondents worked from home more than 80% of the time during the lockdown, this percentage dropped to 9% after the lockdown.

Table 1: Percentage of remote work during and after the SARS-CoV-19 lockdown

Percentage of weekly working time worked remotely	During the first lockdown (2020/03 - 04)	After the first lockdown (2020/07 - 08)
0 – 20 %	10%	58%
21 – 40%	6%	13%
41 – 60%	4%	11%
61 – 80%	6%	9%
81 – 100%	74%	9%

In terms of the total working time, this is unparalleled in Austria. Nevertheless, a substantial share of respondents indicates, that the need to communicate physically with peers remains to be paramount in an efficient conduct of work. This is to be considered especially when discussing interaction technologies as well as emotional factors of motivation and work dedication.

2.1 *Factors influencing employees' desire for remote work*

The results of the analysis of driving forces with regards to remote work, are presented subsequently as well as in Table 2 respectively.

Table 2: Perceived benefits of remote work

	N	Agree	Disagree	No answer
Can work concentrated	1074	67.04%	31.66%	1.30%
Being able to organize work independently	1074	25.42%	73.28%	1.30%
Flexible working hours	1074	41.06%	57.64%	1.30%
No travel to the workplace	1074	83.43%	15.27%	1.30%
Get to know new technologies	1074	5.40%	93.30%	1.30%
Good compatibility of professional and private matters	1074	46.65%	52.05%	1.30%
Financial savings	1074	16.39%	82.31%	1.30%
Stress reduction	1074	19.09%	79.61%	1.30%
Informal working environment	1074	27.00%	71.69%	1.30%
Low administrative effort	1074	6.15%	92.55%	1.30%

The respondents evaluate the greatest benefit of working at home in the elimination of travel time (83,43%). It is noteworthy, that the ability to work in a concentrated manner are perceived as an additional main benefit of working from home. Though strategic answering behavior cannot be ruled out, this is above the original expectation of this research. Another major advantage cited by the respondents is the ability to reconcile professional and private matters (46,65%).

In terms of the drawbacks associated with distance work, the lack of social contacts is not only the highest priority of respondents' categorization, but also the most difficult to find remedies for. This result is consistent with studies that define interaction with colleagues as a main motivating driver for working in the office (Kerrin and Hone 2001). The respondents also perceive the increased coordination effort with colleagues as a disadvantage. Lack of space and lack of IT infrastructure have little influence on the poorer assessment of the attractiveness of distance work. Unclear goals, a lack of support from superiors, and difficulty concentrating are not perceived as disadvantages when working from home.

It is worth noting that only 5% of respondents state that they do not intend to work remotely in the future. For the majority of the surveyed is the existence of telework opportunities seen as an important criterion when selecting a new employer. 30.6% of the respondents would like to work from home in the range of 21-40% of their weekly working time, 28.1% of the respondents in the range of 41-60%. only a small part of the respondents (6.9%) would like to work remotely more than 80% of the weekly working time. Compared to Table 1 it is obvious that the actual extent of remote work after the first lockdown differs significantly from the extent imagined and desired by employees. It seems that after the first lockdown, companies were more eager to return to the usual way of working and remote work was perceived more positively by employees than by companies.

2.2 *Factors influencing the desire for remote work*

The final descriptive statistics provide an overview of the deterring distance work factors, i.e. the reasons why working from home is not pursued by employees. It is found that inverse motivational reasons (e.g. don't like working at home) are not among the main reasons for not using distance work frameworks. The main reason given by those who have not yet worked remote is that their employer did not want them to do so. Almost one third of this group of people is convinced that it is not possible in their current job. Only in third place come reasons that can be found in the person itself, such as prefer to separate work and private life. In terms of main factors, it is found that employers' perception are still the main factors of non-use of distance work modes. This is much in contrast to the current public view of remote work and to be interpreted by policy makers in the future.

In completing the statistical analysis of the data, various factors and their effect on the desire to work from home were analyzed inferentially. The distance to the physical workplace is among the strongest influential factors for respondent's desired share of distance work ($\beta=0.11^{***}$). Thus, every additional kilometer of distance is associated with 0.12 per cent increase in the desire to work from home. In case of a doubling of the average distance to work (27.3 km), on average, respondents assume an increase in their desire to work from home increases to 45.6% from 42.4%.

Additional factors such as respondents' age (no statistical significance, thus not further analyzed), gender (female respondents are found to have less desire for remote work, $\beta=-0.07^{**}$), the presence of flexible working hours ($\beta=0.07^{**}$), time spent working with PC ($\beta=0.21^{***}$) as well as various other work-related and socio-demographic aspects were analyzed. It can thus be seen that the preexisting working environment such as whether the work consists of mainly digital tasks is highly influential on the desire for work from home.

As digitalization is progressing in traditional work arrangements, this desire to work remotely is expected to increase even further. Mitigating the negative perceptions of employers while ensuring that basic human needs – i.e. communication with peers – are met, is thus the cornerstone of future human resource work.

3 Discussion

Remote working policies were vital for the continuation of business activities during the pandemic, but they are not limited only to the time of unprecedented uncertainty caused by the health crisis. According to a McKinsey survey (2020) investigating the attitudes of 800 corporate executives all over the world, it was constated that 38% of executives expected employees to continue to work from home for one or two days a week after the pandemic, while 19% expected employees to work three or more days a week remotely (Lund et al. 2020). According to research conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, around 37% of all jobs in the USA could be performed entirely remotely (Dingel and Neiman 2020) which suggests a great potential to expand remote working to different job positions, sectors and countries as well.

On the other hand, despite bringing significant benefits for both employees and organizations, by eliminating many hurdles such as commuting to work, which can be time consuming, physically tiring, and costly (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2021), and generating better productivity and work-life balance, less stress, and less contact with others (Biron and van Veldhoven 2016), remote work can disrupt the work-life balance of many employees and even cause negative long-term effects for workers, due to the higher time spent in front of the computer (Conroy et al. 2020).

During the SARS-Cov-19 pandemic, the work and personal lives of many people all over the world drastically changed. Many employees were not able to find the balance between work and private life despite being able to spend more time with their families and spending less or no time with daily commuting. This has been caused primarily due to the increased expectation from employers that employees be available also outside working hours (Lonska et al. 2021), due to the fewer rest periods and less predictable schedules, heavier workload, frequent interruptions as well as to the increased autonomy (Llave 2019).

In the context of the many challenges brought by the SARS-Cov-19 pandemic and the increasingly common utilization of distance work practices, it is of uttermost relevance to investigate the main problems arising from the new working environment as well as the balance between private and working life, since employees that receive support and find a positive work-life balance are more likely to be motivated to perform better (Ramakrishnan 2020a,b), what ends up bringing gains in productivity for both the employee and ultimately to the employing organization.

One of the primary objectives of this study was to analyze various factors and their effect on the desire to work from home. The importance of distance work for organizations is demonstrated by different studies that show that people who use distance work have less of a desire to leave the organization or even to change jobs within a company (Kosseck, Lautsch and Eaton 2006). Regarding the factors that influence the employees' desire for work from home, the study conducted shows a significant role for the distance between the place of residence and the place of work. The desire to use work from home increases with distance from the workplace. Distance work provides organizations the benefit of recruiting highly qualified employees almost regardless of whether employees want to commute or not. Kelliher and Anderson (2010) examined the relation between the opportunity of flexible working, which also includes distance work, and employee commitment. In their work flexible working arrangements are perceived as increased autonomy and positively related to greater commitment to the employer.

Remarkable are the ambivalent results in different studies regarding work-life balance. While the compatibility of private and professional interests is cited as a motive for using the remote work, the reasons for refusing it include the desire to separate professional and private matters. Maruyama, Hopkinson and James (2009) highlight in their research the teleworkers' ability to manage work hours as the most important factor to gain a positive work-life-balance.

Regarding the reasons why remote work is not used, it becomes clear that from the employees' perspective, the causes are mainly to be seen in the area of the employer. Caused by the SARS-CoV-19 crisis, companies were forced to introduce remote work as a new form of work in order to protect health. However, if this is to remain a permanent policy in the organization, several factors must be taken into consideration to gain the described positive effects.

4 Limitations and future research

As regards limitations, the nature of the sample with an above average proportion of academically educated respondents needs to be taken in account. Though, several measures are taken to ensure representativity, future research ought to focus on the issue of education and its potential ramification with regards to distance work in particular. Also, the access to mobile devices – and therefore – the ability to fill in the questionnaire is worthwhile considering separately. Though sampling aimed at the inclusion of all population subgroups, a certain selection at all and therefore people excluded from access cannot be ruled out. Finally, certain economic sectors are found to be particularly innovative in providing distance work opportunities to their employees. To the knowledge of the authors of this paper, this could potentially pose a limitation to the external validity of the approach. Findings, therefore, have to be considered in conjunction with the industry of investigation.

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