

EVALUATING THE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING FROM HOME

Hodnocení zkušeností z práce z domu

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ABSTRAKT: Studie se zabývá problematikou využívání zaměstnávání formou home-office a jeho vlivem na život zaměstnanců. Cílem této práce bylo vyhodnotit různorodé zkušenosti s prací z domova, analyzovat spokojenost a efektivitu zaměstnanců před a během pandemie Covid-19. Výsledky poukazují na to, že nejvíce problematickým vlivem pro práci z domova je nedostatečný pracovní prostor a vybavení nebo chybějící osobní kontakt, což nejvíce ovlivňuje efektivitu práce.

Klíčová slova: práce z domova, homeoffice, homeworking, pandemie, Covid-19, flexibilní práce, práce z dálky.

ABSTRACT: The study deals with the issue of employment in the form of home-office (working from home) and its impact on the lives of employees. The objective of this study was to assess diverse experience with working from home, to analyse employee satisfaction and effectiveness before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results show that the biggest problem related to working from home is inappropriate working space and equipment or lack of personal contact, which most affects the effectiveness of work.

Key words: working from home, home-office, homeworking, pandemic, Covid-19, flexible working hours, distance working.

INTRODUCTION

Working from home can be defined as flexible performing of dependent work, where employees work completely (homeworking) or partially (hybrid working) from their home [13]. In the study “Who and how many can work from home?” by [14], the authors mention 4 categories: “Telework”, “Remote work”, “Mobile work”, and “Working from home”. This study is focused on the last category, working from home.

Looking back to the past, we can see that this form of work is not a product of modern times; it was used in times long past, considering e.g. the times before the Industrial Revolution,

when farmers, craftsmen, and other professions used their homes both for living and working. With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, when mass production started to be used and urbanisation increased, with especially young people leaving villages to live and work in towns, this concept was maintained only to a small extent. The tradition when the father passed his knowledge and workshop to his son gradually disappeared. Commuting to work has become an everyday routine. This was enhanced especially by the invention of steam engines, the railway, and finally automobiles. One of the earliest mentions concerning working from home date back to the year 1976, when a former NASA engineer, Jack Nilles, invented an alternative to transport [19]. His idea was to create local workplaces where an employee would not have to travel too long or even did not have to use motor vehicles for transport. This idea was conceived in order to reduce commuting to work due to the crisis in the USA, also known as the oil crisis. One of the conditions of this solution was to build a better data infrastructure and thus better communication between individual local workplaces. Back then, computers were not yet available to such an extent and the internet appeared more than a decade later, so this applies mainly to telephone lines. Even this idea was very innovative at that time, and it was also a possible solution to reduce the consumption of oil as a non-renewable energy resource which has been and probably will be a scarce commodity.

Another major milestone was the terrorist attack on 11 November 2001. The attack on the World Trade Centre in New York was a shock for the whole society. Employees began to worry about their health and safety and were less willing to commute to work in towns and cities with a high concentration of people. Working from home was an alternative for people from the suburbs since such places were less likely to become a target of a terrorist attack [17].

Now let's return to a more modern concept of working from home. First, the terms related to working from home will be defined, namely homeworking and hybrid working [13]. Homeworking refers to working from a place other than the seat of company. It includes e.g. telemarketing [17], or addressing potential customers via telephone, arranging deals, insurance, or carrying out a paid survey of a company (questioning by means of questionnaires, phone calls, or video conferences). This is not physically demanding work but it is not suitable for everyone.

Employees in telemarketing must be resilient, resistant to people's behaviour, be modest, willing to learn with every new question, be able to provide clear explanations which might be often misunderstood, and therefore, be patient and calm. In this area, good communication skills of great importance.

Another type of work that can be included in home working is assembling of products [17], where the necessary parts are delivered to a specific address and the assembled products are then collected. It is for example inserting leaflets in envelopes, assembling figures and magnets for various games, inserting samples into magazines, etc. Again, it is not physically demanding work but the problem might be the time necessary for individual assembly and manual dexterity of workers.

Other work or tasks included in this category are e.g. transcription of texts, assistance with translations, or invoicing of orders for shipping companies. However, for most of these tasks, previous experience or relevant qualification is necessary.

As seen from the aforementioned work and tasks falling within the category of homeworking, they can be mostly carried out by women or disabled people. The reason is that very often, housewives, women on maternity leave, single parents, or disabled people receive an allowance from the state which is far from compensating the salary they would earn if they could do their job.

The second group are work and tasks that could be included in the category of the so-called hybrid working [17]. Hybrid working is work partially carried out from home and partially from an office or workplace at the seat of the company. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, this was considered a very required benefit, which many companies use to attract potential workers, as it enables great flexibility. It is an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, which occurred on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, China. The name COVID-19 stabilized very quickly due to the disease. The origin is not exactly known. Within a few months, the virus had spread to more than a hundred countries around the world. The symptoms are very different for each individual. Asymptomatic patients, patients with fever, loss of smell or taste, influenza, or pneumonia are recorded. The virus can spread through the air in close contact with an infected and healthy individual. Through coughing and talking, an infected person transmits the virus to another person who inhales the virus through the nose or mouth [27]. Employees could better balance their personal and professional life. Hybrid working enabled time flexibility but also the comfort of home. The latter was appreciated by many employees, especially in the case of any disease, be it common cold, disease of a child, who could thus be taken better care of, or in the case of urgent family matters. Hybrid working was also used when an employee had ordered some goods online and had to wait for the delivery at home. For these reasons, before the pandemic, only few people would say that this benefit was rather a “punishment”, since it was used only in the case it was needed, planned, and asked for by the employee. However, with Covid-19, this benefit soon turned into a disadvantage.

Almost overnight, employees had to leave their workplace and create a new one in their homes. For many of them, it was difficult, yet necessary. From simply finding temporarily some space at home for working, borrowing a laptop from the employer, long-term work turned into problems. These problems include finding space for work, demotivation, anxiety, distraction, and stress [22]. The negative feelings are also connected with government regulations, such as closure of schools to stop the spread of Covid-19, when learning and teaching was carried out in the form of distance learning. In the past, isolation of children had contributed to a rapid decrease of transmission of the 1918 influenza virus [6]; health organizations thus did not hesitate to use this practice again.

The objective of this study is to assess diverse experience with working from home and analyse the satisfaction and effectiveness of employees before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

LITERARY RESEARCH

The transformation of working from home as a benefit into a forced activity caused by the efforts to protect human health is addressed in the study by Kyzlinková, Veverková, and Vychová [17], who evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of working from home from the perspective of employees and employers (see Table 1). By means of a questionnaire survey and publicly available information, the authors point to minor use of working from home before the pandemic (only 4-8 % of employed people). A sharp increase was recorded with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and forced shift of work from workplace to home. It was an increase of up to 100 %.

Table No. 1: Advantages and disadvantages for employees and employers

	Employee	Employer
Advantages	Time saving	More satisfied employees
	Reduction of travel costs	Reduction of operating costs
	Flexible schedule	Increase in labour productivity
	Better balance of professional and personal life	Possibility to get cheaper workforce
	Possibility to take care of children	Possibility to choose own equipment

	Possibility to do not too time-consuming housework	
Disadvantages	<p>Costs related to creation of appropriate workspace</p> <p>Loss of social contacts</p> <p>Necessary self-discipline</p> <p>Own work equipment</p> <p>Some people believe that working from home means doing nothing</p>	<p>Impossibility to fully control the performance of employees</p> <p>Possible increased costs of IT tools</p> <p>More difficult to motivate employees</p>

Source: Article „Práce z domova – popis stavu pře pandemií a možné konsekvence do nových poměrů organizace práce“ [20], own processing.

In this context, a questionnaire survey conducted by T-mobile [24] showed that up to a third of its employees work from home, where 68 % of the employees are satisfied and only 13 % of the employees perceive this experience negatively. The questionnaire aimed at employee satisfaction and preparedness of companies for new measures. The research showed that 52 % of the respondents are satisfied with working from home, out of which 75 % feel they are more efficient, doing more work at home than in the office for the same amount of time. Procrastination is a problem for 27 % only, and it applies mainly to younger people at the age of 26-34. The biggest advantages include more free time (no commuting to work), no dress code, and better concentration. On the other hand, disadvantages are long meetings, more disturbing factors (it applies mainly to people at the age of 35-44, who have families and school children). The biggest negative mentioned was a lack of personal contact.

These facts are confirmed in the article by Lina Vyas and Nantapong Butakhieo [25]. The study conducted in April 2020 showed that more than 80 % of employees preferred at least partial work from home; the differences were in the preferred number of days in a week, which indicates preference for hybrid working. The most commonly mentioned reasons are more time for relaxation (72.2 % of the respondents strongly agree), reduction of work-related stress (63.8 % of the respondents agree), and better work-life balance (60.7 % of the respondents strongly agree).

On the other hand, a total of 60 % of the companies participating in the survey state that they were not prepared for this situation and had to adopt new measures. Out of these, 40 % of the companies managed to adapt quickly to the new situation. However, one in five employees admits that the shift from the office to home was accompanied by many problems, to which their employer was not able to react quickly. [24]

Work and family are usually perceived as two different worlds with strictly defined boundaries. However, crisis situations, such as the world pandemic makes these two worlds interconnected [23]. Problems related to working from home are described also in the e-survey conducted by Eurofound [12], according to which the respondents most difficult to adapt to the situation were women who cared for children (up to 12 years old) in a shared household, where their personal life was affected by the professional life and vice versa. The respondents also mention a higher number of conflicts and more overtime hours. This survey aimed to find out what impacts were there on the respondents during 12 months. The respondents state that although they were not working, they were worried about their work; they still feel under pressure and tired, not able to do anything after work (e.g. housework). Another survey [20] focused on female academic workers. The results of the survey show that the participants had to organize their work obligations (teaching, publications, research activities, etc.) according to the time intended for caring for children and housework. Obviously, the participants could also work at night, when the children were asleep, which lead to exhaustion, reduced work pace, and sleep deprivation. Due to the limited time and intensive work pace, the participants started to feel stressed and inadequate as mothers and academic workers.

In her study “The subjective well-being of homeworkers across life domains” [5], Darja Reuschke specified that employee well-being is affected by working from home or in an office, but also the profession as such, and the stability of family background. The results concerning long-term work from home provided ambiguous answers. The respondents without families or working together with other people feel no change in their personal or professional life; on the other hand, the respondents who have families and young children have noticed big differences in both professional and personal life, from which various stress situations (conflicts in families) arise.

The same findings are confirmed by the study “Influence of grit on lifestyle factors during the COVID-19 pandemic in a sample of adults in the United States” [11] focused on the lifestyle of individuals and individual characteristic features during the first restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study confirmed the existence of the relationship between the work effort with psychical well-being and physical health. Elderly people with regular or even

increased physical activity, higher education (university education), and healthy lifestyle did not have major problems to adapt to working from home, while younger persons or persons with impaired physical health (chronic diseases) and undeveloped health habits had more problems to adapt to the situation, especially persons with secondary education sometimes even lost their work (the beginning of the pandemic increased unemployment rate). The feelings of loneliness and isolation even triggered a chronic illness measurable using CRP (C-reactive protein) tests [16].

This topic is further addressed in the research conducted by [2] in 7 countries, which focused on emotional well-being and mental health. The respondents were asked to compare the situation before and during the pandemic. As much as 9 % of the respondents stated that their psychical well-being is worse than before the pandemic.

The closure of schools, shops, restaurants, and the relocation of workers to their homes has had an adverse effect on their health. There is evidence that the average 5-hour sitting when in the workplace has increased to 8 hours; many employees have even stopped following their regular eating schedule, which may lead either to overeating (literally uncontrolled eating) or insufficient eating [3]. Reduced workload and intake results in worse mental health and sleep quality, even contributing to increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, etc. [1]. The research by Barbosa, Cowell, Dowd [6] identifies higher consumption of alcohol in the USA at the outbreak of the pandemic. Compared to the February data, the respondents admitted that in April, they consumed nearly 29 % more alcoholic drinks a day. On the other hand, binge drinking decreased, as many people usually drink only when there is some occasion, such as celebrations, and due to the closure of all bars and pubs, it was not possible to consume alcohol in the company of other people [3].

Excessive eating and not enough physical exercise was recorded by means of a smartphone application called “Taberhythm” [21], when between January and May 2020, a decline in physical movement and lack of time to follow a regular eating schedule was recorded, which caused excessive eating in some cases. An online survey by Maugeri et al. [18] showed a decrease in physical activity of approx. 20 % of women, and 40 % of men during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Productivity and the associated personal well-being are specified in more detail in the aforementioned article on working from home. The authors compare the number of hours worked before and during the pandemic, which indicates that significantly fewer hours were worked during the pandemic. The resulting graphs and their analysis are presented in the findings in [17].

To achieve the objective of this paper, the following questions were formulated: What is the experience of working from home before and after the Covid-19 pandemic? How did employees perceive working from home? What effect does working from home have on the efficiency of employees?

DATA AND METHODS

The objective of this paper is to evaluate diverse experience of working from home and to analyse employee satisfaction and efficiency before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. To achieve the objectives set, respondents will be selected using snowball sampling.

Qualitative research through interviews was used to achieve the set aim. Respondents were selected from the authors' surroundings, the snowball method was used. The interviews were conducted by means of the platform MS Teams, each respondent had to give their prior consent to the interview. Based on the findings from the literature search, a framework of questions was compiled. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were analyzed and the common experiences were identified, which were then divided into categories by logical deduction. Experiences from individual categories were analyzed and compared, and a new theory was formulated.

The categories were determined: experience, advantage, equipment, work efficiency, and personal life.

The questions in the interviews are formulated to explore the perceptions and experience with working from home before and during the pandemic:

- 1) Describe your job position and job content.
- 2) Describe your experience with working from home.
- 3) Did your employer provide you with appropriate equipment?
- 4) Did working from home affect your efficiency?
- 5) Do you perceive any difference between your personal and professional life in relation to working from home?
- 6) Would you use working from home in the future?

RESULTS

A total of 6 respondents participated in the research. The sample is rather small but due to the method used (in-depth interview), their responses provide sufficient information to meet the objective of the research.

Five out of six respondents are software developers, the sixth respondent is a teacher at the elementary school. Except for the teacher, all respondents have long-term experience with working from home. As a big advantage, they mention the possibility to combine professional and personal life. Respondent A. stated: *“I think the biggest advantage for me is the possibility to get up later, and when I do get up, I am “at work” in two minutes. I also use working from home for arranging some personal matters, such as waiting for delivery of some goods ordered, etc.”*. All 5 software developers agree that they could use working from home only for a limited number of days. Respondent J. said: *“Before the pandemic, working from home was allowed for 5 days in a month only. We could thus decide when to use it.”* Furthermore, all respondents agreed that another great advantage from the employee perspective is the reduction of commuting to work. The teacher K. could not use working from home before the pandemic; however, she sees the advantage of forced working from home in not having to commute and wear face masks.

None of the respondents mentions any disadvantages from the period before the pandemic, since back then, working from home was voluntary, used mostly at their discretion. At the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, the first disadvantages of working from home started to appear, which later became a long-term problem for the respondents. Respondent G. states: *“In less than a month after starting to work from home, I realized I do not have an adequate workspace. I live in a flat, with two young children (3 years and 1 year) and it’s difficult for me to concentrate on work. This causes frequent conflicts between me and my wife. I feel more stressed than before.”* Other disadvantages mentioned by the respondents included lack of personal contact, physical activity, and technical problems.

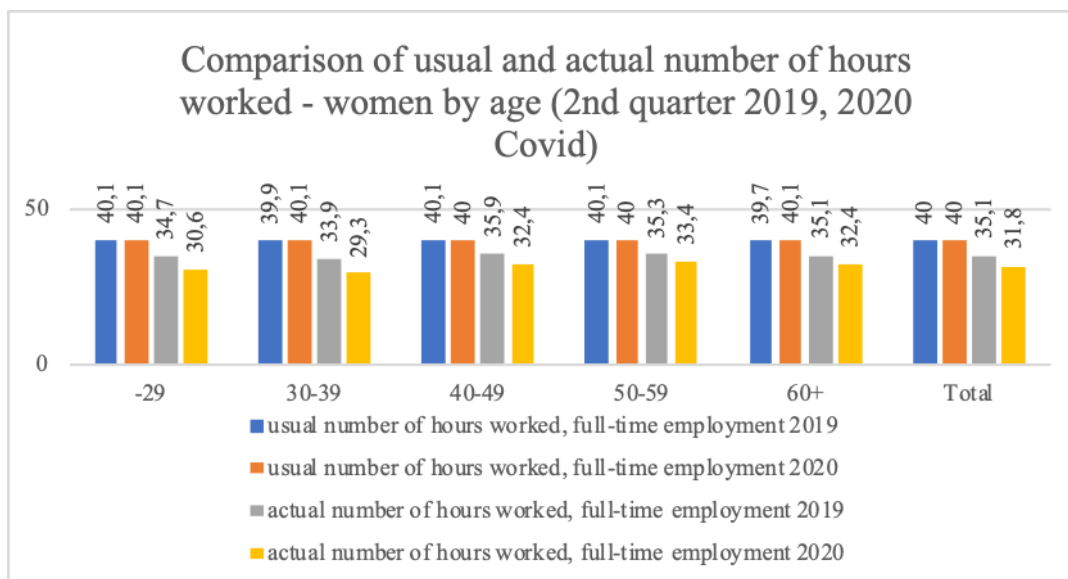
The equipment provided by the employer was sufficient only in the case of the teacher, who needs only good internet connection and a new computer for her work. Other respondents answered they had to buy some equipment or use their own. *“The employer allowed us to take only a notebook and a monitor, maybe a docking station. I would say basic equipment, in my opinion. I had to buy other things or use mine,”* said respondent F.

Most respondents say that they feel that long-term working from home reduces their work efficiency. Two respondents reported problems with concentration or procrastination, three

other respondents did not feel good about e-mail communication and complained about the inability to maintain long-term attention, one respondent did not notice any change. The situation was best described by respondent G., who stated that *“My work is based on communication; personally, I prefer face-to-face contact, if only for the direct and non-verbal communication. I think efficiency is much lower than when meeting face-to-face, as people tend to work on other things during a Teams or skype meeting, and do not pay full attention to the interview or meeting.”*

The feelings of inefficiency can be compared with the findings presented in the article *“Práce z domova”* by [17], which focuses on the usual and actual number of hours worked by men and women in the first quarters of the years 2019 and 2020. Significant changes in the number of hours worked were recorded mainly in the category of women at the age of 0-29 and 30-39 (see Figure 1).

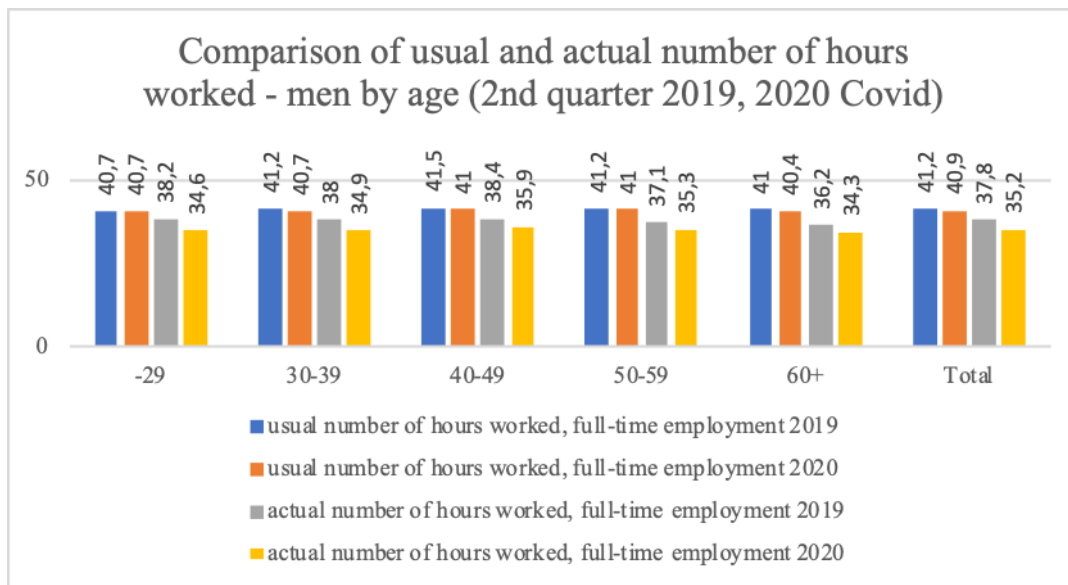
Figure No. 1: Distribution of hours worked before and during the pandemic - Women.



Source: article *„Práce z domova – popis stavu pře pandemií a možné konsekvence do nových poměrů organizace práce“* [17], own processing.

The number of hours worked by men (see Figure 2) also shows a slight decrease but smaller than in the case of women. A negative impact on the efficiency could be caused by the combination of working from home and the related closure of schools. The decrease ranged between 10-15 % in the case of men, and up to 25 % for women.

Figure No. 2: Distribution of hours worked before and during the pandemic – Men



Source: article „Práce z domova – popis stavu pře pandemií a možné konsekvence do nových poměrů organizace práce“ [17], own processing.

The responses are completely different in the case of the question of to what extent working from home has affected the respondents' personal life. The respondents without families (4) do not have any problem with keeping the balance between personal and professional life. In contrast, the respondents who have families (2) describe problems with keeping work-life balance, being forced to tackle personal problems while working. Respondent J. commented on this question as follows: *“From the perspective of personal relationships, nothing has changed – maybe got better. However, I’ve heard my colleagues’ negative responses. The main reason is, in my opinion, the long time spent in a small space with a family, when children had to stay at home due to the government measures related to distance education. I think that if I was in this situation, I would feel stressed myself.”*

Most respondents admit they could imagine working from home but only in a combined form when they would work from home for 1-2 days a week. None of the respondents wanted to work from home for a long period of time. Only respondent K. (teacher) did not agree with working from home in any form. As she said, *“I hope that I will never have to work from home. It was great to experience and try something new but my work cannot be done well online. At the beginning, many children did not even have the appropriate equipment for distance learning or more children from one family had to share one computer. In such a case, I had to rely on the explanation provided by parents. This could never happen “offline”, at school.”*

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Based on the obtained results, it was possible to answer all formulated questions in order to meet the aim of this paper. Most respondents have a long experience of working from home both before and during the pandemic, and are therefore able to assess both situations. One respondent had no previous experience working from home. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, she had to adapt quickly to the situation and teach primary school children online. This single respondent said that she did not want to work from home in the future.

For this respondent K., working from home took too much time, because as a teacher she struggled with the fact that families were not prepared for distance learning. As she herself pointed out, due to the low concentration of pupils in online learning using distance communication tools, the pressure on parents who help children with homework has intensified. Many parents also worked from home. The respondent also admitted that her parents did not hesitate to contact her at the weekend. This indicates that distance learning burdened teachers both in their professional time and in their free time.

From the point of view of the parent, the problems with distance education were also confirmed by the respondent G., who has a family and had to take care of it at least partially during the day, thus taking time to work for the employer. [4] confirms the more demanding work in the home environment, stating that even before the pandemic period, it was difficult for workers to manage work and family responsibilities when it was not possible to separate the office and the home environment. [15] adds that the boundaries between work and private life are blurred in the home office, which can affect the length of working hours. In contrast, according to [28], who conducted a survey of Amazon Mechanical Turk employees in the United States, improved their perceived work-life balance during the pandemic.

Workplace flexibility, home office environment conditions and organizational support are positively associated with productivity and job satisfaction from home. Employees who worked from home during COVID-19 felt less time pressure and, conversely, experienced lower levels of conflict between work and family [10]. It can be concluded that the efficiency of work from home is mainly influenced by the setting of the functioning of the family. Respondents without families only mention the problem of insufficient equipment, have no problems working from home and do not feel any significant changes in their productivity. In contrast, respondents with families had to put in more effort and time to work and care for the children. As a result, they usually work longer because they are trying to catch up on breaks during the day, they feel tired

at the end of the day and do not have enough strength for other activities. Respondents find these situations stressful and admit a higher number of conflicts in the family.

According to the respondents, other possible causes of poorer performance when working from home also include equipment provided by the employer. Respondents working in the field of software development state that they had only the basic equipment, which consists of a laptop, monitor and docking station. In such cases, respondents must use their own equipment. This mainly concerns the purchase of monitors, headphones with a microphone, various types of cables to ensure optimal internet connection and workspace equipment (desk, comfortable chair suitable for long-term sitting). [9] also dealt with the sudden relocation of employees to home offices, focusing on related ergonomic issues that employees suddenly had to deal with during the lockdown. He found that they were often forced to face the immediate need to furnish their office space with what they had at home: dining tables and chairs, other makeshift tables, that they often had no external input devices or monitors, and that they often had to share their makeshift office with other members of family.

The results of the research show that the reasons for lower productivity and employee satisfaction when working from home also include a reduced ability to communicate with colleagues and a lack of personal contact. This is confirmed by [26], who state in their study that respondents often faced emotional problems during forced labor from home. The results of an online survey from Italy also indicated that the sudden relocation of employees to their homes contributed to the difficulty of maintaining working contacts. In this study employees reported that there was a negative development in employment relationships despite the fact that they used communication tools fully [7].

CONCLUSION

The objective of the paper was to assess diverse experience with working from home. As the results show, working from home is affected by several factors, most commonly by living with a family and young children, who had to stay at home during the Covid-19 pandemic and the related government measures. The evaluation of the data showed to what extent employees are satisfied with long-term working from home, newly introduced for some of them. Surprisingly, the thing the employees miss the most is the lack of personal contact, due to which they do not have any feedback from their colleagues or pupils in the case of teachers. In such cases, they often feel inefficient, which is, in their case, caused by remote communication. This

results in small misunderstandings arising from the lack of non-verbal communication. Another negative factor is overall and long-term isolation in their homes, which largely affects the psychic of individual employees.

Another factor that plays a role is the need for quiet workspace. Therefore, in terms of possible future work from home, the respondents would prefer a combined form, when they would commute to work even despite the time lost while travelling. They would like to see working from home as a voluntary option, with the possibility to choose the days they want to spend at home. Despite this, the respondents expect a higher number of days on which they could work from home since so far, their number has been regulated by the employer.

In conclusion, it can be stated that working from home in any form would still represent a required employee benefit. In spite of significant changes and its long-term character during the pandemic, employers see the advantage of working from home in energy savings, reduced costs related to expensive rents, or other use of office space. Working from home will evolve and change with each new situation and the development of information technologies.

The limit of the research was the small number of respondents who have experience working from home. Given the gradual expansion of the need to work from home, it would be appropriate to repeat the research in the future and define new facts that could help to anchor this way of employment in practice and could be the basis for further research in the field of human resources management and management.

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